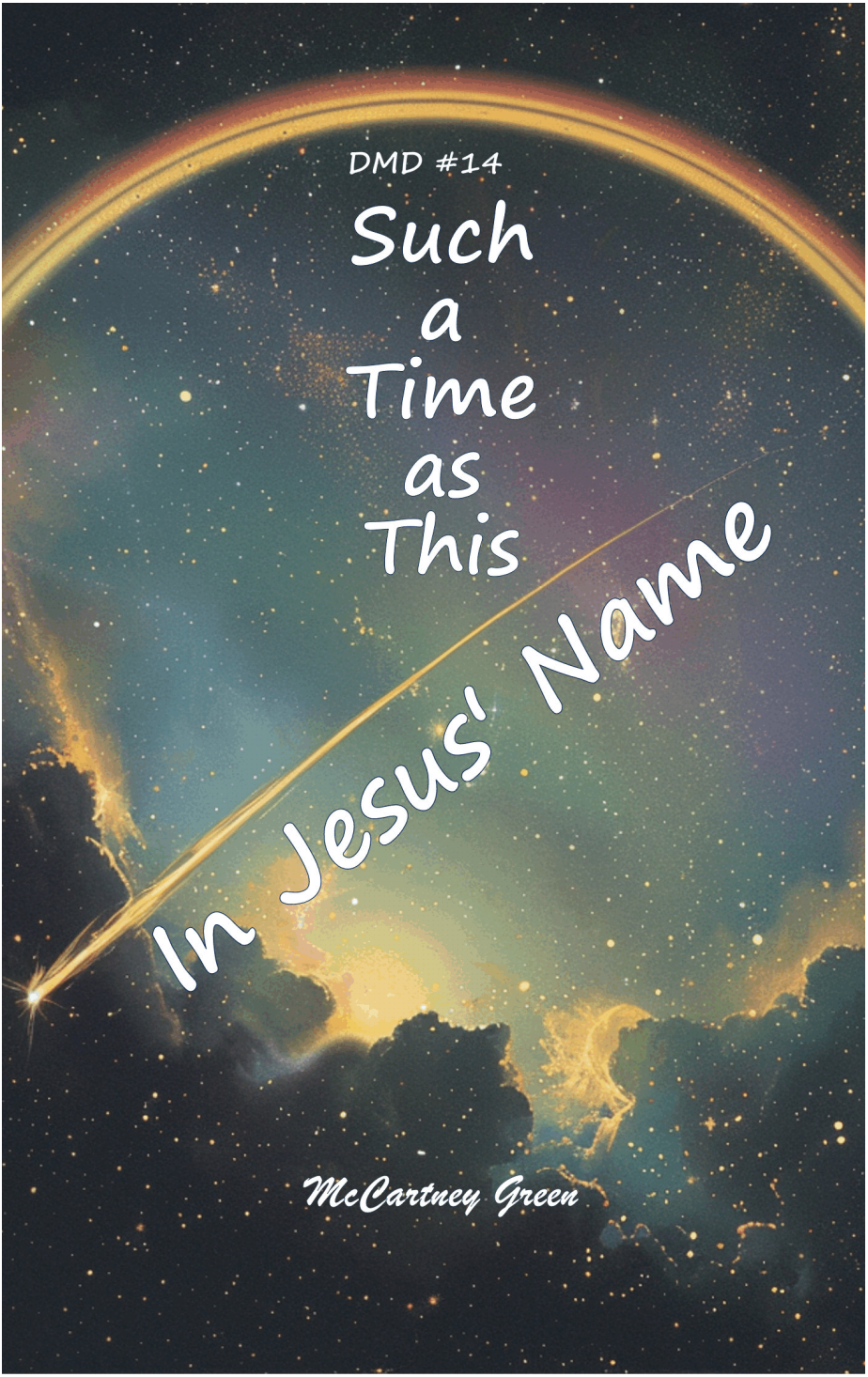


DMD #14

Such a Time as This

In Jesus' Name

McCartney Green

DND #14

Such a Time as This

In Jesus' Name

McCartney Green

Copyright©2026 McCartney Green
Website Edition June 9, 2026

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, or in any information storage or retrieval system is forbidden without the written permission of McCartney Green.

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

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

Keeping Tabs for #14

One week into the new year that begins at the end of Book #13.
This "Keeping Tabs" is as of Wednesday afternoon, January 8th

West Coast Family

Eric Kino Family
Eric turned 70 on June 14th
Shelley turned 65 on Oct 27th
Emmanuel (Manny) is 2½ (3 May 2)
Noah is 2½ (3 May7)
Angelina is 2½ (3 May 10)
Abraham (Abe) is 2½ (3 May 11)
Nathaniel (Nate) is 2½ (3 May 27)

[Rebecca born May 8th stillborn
Rachel born May 12th stillborn
Luke, (down syndrome,) born May 13th, murdered May 30th
Simon (congenital heart disease,) born May 15th, murdered July 9th
Maria born May22nd, murdered two years later]

Ricky Kino Family
Ricky Kino turned 52 last May
Breanna Adams Kino turned 49 on August 27th
Eric III turned 21 Dec 14th
Taylor turned 17August 30th
Amari Meeks is 9
Brittney Meeks is 5

Mark Adams Family
Mark Adams turned 40 October 29th
Bella Adams will be *40 Jan 29th
Joseph (JoJo) turned 21 June 30th
Logan turned 20 July 17th
Emily (Em) turned 4 on Dec 11th
[Hold place for baby!]

Joey Adams Family
Joey Adams turned 38 August 22nd
Breez Adams is 35 will be 36 in April
Sophia turned 7 in May
Kelstyn turned 4 Dec 16th
Ledger turned 3 Nov 23rd

Wallace Family
June Flower (Jeffy) Kino Wallace will be 29 Mar 15th
Cameron Wallace was 30 July 17th
Elijah 2 mo. born Nov 9th

Lee Families
Justin Lee will be 67 in March
Lori Lee will be 53 in April

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

Deal Family
Jensen Deal is 30
Kimberly Lee Deal will be 27 in Feb
Jason Jensen (Jay) 6wksborn Nov 26th

Davis Family
Jefferson Davis turned 44 Nov 8th
MacKenzie (Mickey) Daley Davis will be 43 on Feb 3rd
Daniel turns *13 Jan 8th
Jeremy turns *12 Jan 10th
Scarlett 6 wks born Nov 24th

Brooks Family (Formerly Perez)
Jewell Brooks will be 43 July 19th
Jordan Brooks will be 20 July 18th
Josie Brooks will be 11 in Feb
Jamie Brooks will be 9 in April

Morgan Family
Alec Morgan 18
Destiny Copeland Morgan 17
[Hold place for baby!]

Keith Family
David Keith is 45
Carol Keith is 40
Melody Keith will be 19 April 26th
Philip Keith will be 17 March 3rd
Lyle Keith will be 15 May 5th

Reverend Ronald Clark's Family
Ronny Clark - 92
Connie Clark - deceased
Ronald Clark Jr - deceased
Linda Clark - 66
Linda's son Franklin - deceased
(Ronny's great grandchildren)
Carson turned 15 last July 29th
Sydney turned 11 Oct 3rd
Ronny's older brother
Dr. Marcel Clark (5 yrs older than Ronny) Deceased, never married, no children

Ronny's younger sisters Donna and Margaret are deceased.
[More of Clark family below under 'Other Characters']

Quinn Family
Alo Quinn - father 83
Dani Quinn- mother 75
Raylynn will be 21 March 1st
Kaylee will be 19 - Feb 15th

East Coast Family

Coley Family
Senior Agent Christopher (Chris) Coley 30
Marissa Daley Coley was 29 Aug 2nd
Christian 6 weeks born Nov. 25th

Nash/Smith Family
Tobias (Toby Nash) is 56
Caroline (Caro) is 54
Grace (Gracie Nash) will be 26 in Feb
Brody turned 22 in July

Stewart Family
Chaz(Charles Anthony Stewart III) is 49
Lisa Lewis Stewart turned 46 May 15th
Charlie (Charles Anthony Stewart IV) will be 15 on Feb 11th
Matt turns *13 on Jan 20th
Aralyn will be 8 on Feb 9th
Jonathon Jones and
Lachlyn Bryte 2 mo. born Nov 1st

Maddie Lewis (Lisa's grandmother) was 87 when she left this world this past June 18th
[More of Stewart family below under 'Other Characters']

John Appel Family
John Appel 51
Jodi Appel will be 49 Feb 14th
Hannah Brown is 13

Jacob Appel Family
Jacob (Jake) Appel turns 22 Feb 28th
Melaynah Stewart Appel was 21 on Nov 22nd

Tanner Family
Keegan - will be 50 Feb 8th
Lizzy will be 43 April 10th
Heather turns *25 Jan 10th
Rose turned 24 Dec 25th
Violet turned 24 Dec 25th
Daisy turned 23 Dec 19th

Lily turned 23-Dec 19th
Gabe turned 18 on June 14th
Iris turned 3 on Dec 10th
Isaiah &Gentian 6wks born Nov 25th

Tennessee Rancher, Nolan Sawyer was 28 April 26th (Heather's fiancé)
CJ Blackmon - was 28 in May (Violet's boyfriend)

Murphy Family
Rebecca Murphy is 36 [Director of Education/Teacher @ Gabe Tanner Community Center]
Peyton Murphy turned 18 in July
Lucas Murphy turns *15 on Jan 9th
Atlanta AAIC, Andrew Dalton will be 39 on Jan 5th

Firefighter Special Operations
Jericho Jones 28 (Rose's boyfriend, twin of Joshua Jones, wide receiver for Miami Dolphins, parents; Dean and Diane Jones)
Jimmy Callaway 28
Max Hooks 27
Micah Ferguson 26
Luke Jackson 29
Jalen Shipley 23

Other Characters

Agent Hart Akins
[Texas Senior AIC] - turned 31 on Nov 12th

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

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

Charles Stewart Jr.- Chaz' father-rancher
Patricia Stewart-Chaz' mother retired cardiologist

Tyson Stewart - Chaz' younger brother, married Jenny from the hood and is now Sheriff of Pine County

Cindy Stewart Clark - (Chaz' little sister.)
Cindy's husband, Bo Clark
and daughter Kylie- 15

Dr. Stephanie Stewart-Ross Chaz' youngest sister.
Husband Parker Ross
Son Parker - 12

More of the Morgan Family
Ivana Morgan - Alec's mother

Dustin Copeland - Desi' father
Marvenia Copeland- Desi's mom
Charity Copeland -Desi's older sister, age 20 Going to Bible college

More of the Ronald Clark Family
Ronny's sisters Donna & Margaret were killed in car accident together.

Donna deceased (8yrs younger than Ronny)
m.
Sam Hall (divorced)
Son- Andrew Hall is 54
DIL-Nicole Hall is 50
Son-Harrison Hall is 28
Daughter-Camille Hall is 24

Margaret deceased (10 yrs younger than Ronny)
m.
William Barnes (divorced)

Son- Jesse Barnes is 50
DIL- Rebecca (Becky) Barnes is 45
Son-Patrick Barnes is 27

✝✝✝

Isaiah 26:19-20
But your dead will live, Lord;
their bodies will rise—
let those who dwell in the dust
wake up and shout for joy—
your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth
to her dead.
Go, my people, enter your rooms
and shut the doors behind you;
hide yourselves for a little while
until his wrath has passed by.

✝✝✝

✝✝✝

Isaiah 25:8
"...he will swallow up death
forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe
away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's
disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken."

✝✝✝

2 Timothy 3:1-5
"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.
People will be lovers of
themselves, lovers of money,
boastful, proud, abusive,
disobedient to their parents,
ungrateful, unholy, without love,
unforgiving, slanderous, without
self-control, brutal, not lovers of
the good, treacherous, rash,
conceited, lovers of pleasure rather
than lovers of God— having a
form of godliness but denying its
power. Have nothing to do with
such people.

✝✝✝

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17
For the Lord himself will come
down from heaven, with a loud
command, with the voice of the
archangel and with the trumpet
call of God, and the dead in Christ
will rise first. 17 After that, we
who are still alive and are left will
be caught up together with them in
the clouds to meet the Lord in the
air. And so we will be with the
Lord forever.

✝✝✝

Bad Guys in the Entire Seris
[Partial list of some charges and the bad stuff they Perpetrated]

James Crane - deceased; assault, rape, battery, false imprisonment, attempted murder of Eric Kino, Shelley Adams Kino and Ricky Kino.

George Mancini - deceased; criminal trespass, assault, battery, attempted rape.

Marcus Winstead - deceased; assault, attempted rape, 14 counts of date rape, attempted murder, and murder of Cari and Julie Stewart.

Andrea Winstead - in prison for assault, attempted murder, false imprisonment, three counts of conspiracy to commit murder, murder of her brother Marcus. Served twenty and up for parole in 5 more years.

Tommy Crane - younger brother of James, serving life for murder of an Ameritech agent, 3 counts of kidnapping, torture, rape, child abuse, child endangerment, attempted vehicular homicide and false imprisonment.

Senator Hartman, Anthony Celados, Hunter Cantrell (Buzz cut-brother of Brian Cantrell who went to Quantico with Keegan.) Child trafficking, terrorism, false imprisonment, kidnapping, 39 counts of murder, child abuse. All serving life in prison with no possibility of parole, blackmail, tax evasion, money laundering etc.

Senator Talmond Daley - deceased; murder, rape, kidnapping, conspiracy to commit murder, attempted murder, child abuse against Mackenzie Daley Davis and Jeff Davis, blackmail, tax evasion, money laundering.

Kurt Wells - Daley's right hand man, serving life in prison, for all of the above.

Gordon Landow - deceased; Bella Adams' ex-husband, Logan Adams' biological father. Spousal abuse, rape, sodomy, attempted murder.

Dr. Julian Blackmon - serving life for conspiracy to commit murder, kidnapping, battery and fertility fraud thru forced harvesting of Eric and Shelley Kino eggs and sperm, blackmail, battery, false imprisonment of Dr. June Flower Kino, Kim Lee, and Taylor Kino.

Marilyn Monroe - serving life for 15 counts of murder, false imprisonment, fertility fraud, battery, and more.

Mia Casellas - serving life with possibility of parole for kidnapping, conspiracy to commit murder, battery, etc.

Mike Moreland [Advertising Entrepreneur] 25 last September, Rose's ex-boyfriend. No crime, just a bad guy who needs to learn a lesson. Civil suit being brought against him for sexual harassment.

Brett Adderman, 21, youngest child of William Adderman. In prison for rape, assault, battery, and attempted kidnapping of Melaynah Stewart Appel.

Mason Cole junior at UCLA age 26, keeps hitting on Jordan.

Garrett Clark, serial rapist guy that hurt Jordan.

Cade Kessler, age 20, Melody Keith's ex-boyfriend, in jail awaiting trial for attempted rape, attempted murder, false imprisonment, conspiracy to commit murder.

Carl Deetz, Hannah Brown's mother's boyfriend, awaiting trial for murder, false imprisonment, child abuse, sexual assault of a minor.

Banoy Cruz and friends- awaiting trial for conspiracy to commit murder, kidnapping, false imprisonment, theft, abuse of elderly.

Ameritech Security hierarchy

Chief Director - Jason Lee
Deputy Chief Director - Joseph Adams

Division Chief Directors/
Senior Agents
Eastern Division - Keegan Tanner
Western Division - Jefferson Davis

SAC - Senior Agent in Charge
Areas
Atlanta - SAC Warren Wisener
Chicago - SAC Jermaine Hults
Florida - SAC Albi Semen
Las Vegas - SAC Quinn Wingo
Los Angeles - SAC Reed Duffey
New York - SAC Chris Coley
Texas - SAC Hart Akins

Assistant Area AAICs
Atlanta - Agent Andrew Dalton
Chicago - Agent
Florida - Agent
Las Vegas - Agent
Los Angeles - Agent Bentley Trout
New York - Agent
Texas - Agent

International Division Directors
International Chief Director - Alphonse Guzman
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 (JETTs)
Director Spec. Ops - Deputy Chief Joseph Adams
Deputy Director Spec. Ops. - Senior Agent Cameron Wallace

Senior 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
Until Commander - Senior Agent Samuel Edwards (Red)
Unit Commander - Senior Agent Graham Warner (Black)
Unit Commander - Senior Agent Desmond Badger (Blue)
Female Unit Commander - Senior Agent Sonya Brown

The Twelve

Eric Kino - Hawaii, USA - 70

Henrik Johansen - Norway - 72

Ces Iman - Australia - 75

Miguel Rohas Alvarez - Peru - 75

Lev Vasilyev - Russia - 75

Thomas Sawyer - Kansas, USA - 78

Alo Quinn - Oklahoma, USA - 83

Sakchai Chen - Thailand - 84

Andrew Musani - Uganda - 85

Ronald Clark - California, USA - 92

William Wallace - Scotland, GB - 98

Who is the twelfth man
????????????

See Photos of the Twelve at:
mccartneygreen.org/photo-album

2 Corinthians 10:4

"For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds."

✝✝✝

Love has nothing to do with what you are expecting to get–
only with what you are expecting to give–which is everything."

~Katharine Hepburn~

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 in a few weeks."

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. “No thanks. Maybe next time,” he said casually. He looked at Mika. “See ya, Meeks. 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 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.”

“Teo, he’s just, too, 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?”

“How about that first classroom past Reverend Clark’s office?”

Taylor nodded. “Okay. That’s where we’ll be.”

The girls headed to the classroom, but instead of sitting in the chairs, they sat on the floor in the far corner.

Taylor smiled at Mika. She was so pretty. She was much taller than Taylor herself by about five inches. She was slim, and she allowed her black hair to be natural, so it was thick and curly and came to her shoulders. Her dark complexion was clear and smooth, she wore only a little bit of makeup and Taylor thought she could be a model.

“So, what’s up with that? I mean, with how you aren’t allowed to go where you want?” Mika asked.

“Oh, well, it didn’t used to be like that so much, but, this past year, someone tried to kidnap me—twice. Once off the beach behind my grandparent’s home, and once from school. That time they almost made it. They drugged me and put me in a van, but Gabe chased the van down and got me back.”

“Oh yeah, I remember something about that. He like, killed people, right?”

Taylor nodded. “Yeah. And he got shot and stabbed and almost died. It was a hard time. So anyway, Dad is not ready to let me be a normal kid anymore.”

“I don’t blame him.”

Taylor smiled. “Me neither. So, we have about thirty minutes. Tell me about your boyfriend.”

She shrugged. “Teo has been my boyfriend for like, a year and three months.” She made a face. “I thought I was so lucky to have him because he’s really popular at school.”

Taylor nodded. “He’s really cute.”

“Yeah, but that ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. All this time I kind of pretended that I didn’t know or didn’t care ‘bout the stuff he’s all in to, but I’m starting to see things different now.”

“Different?”

“Yeah. Because, like, I mean, I found Jesus. Listen, Taylor, so, I might sound stupid, but a few weeks ago, right before Christmas, while I was listening to Mr. Adams sing I...”

“Mr. Adams? You mean, Logan?”

Mika nodded. “The other kids call him Mr. Adams. Anyway, when he was singing, I felt like, I don’t even know how to say it, I mean, I felt Jesus in my heart, like I could feel Him, ya know? He made me feel so happy, but also made me feel like I wanted to change my life. Like, I wanted to do stuff right. Does that sound totally crazy?”

Taylor smiled and shook her head. “That’s not crazy at all. That’s what Jesus does. He fills us with His spirit and we begin to realize that we might not be able to see Him right now, but He’s real and you can actually feel His Holy Spirit. It makes you want

to be holy like Jesus and obey His commandments, because we begin to realize that the rules God gives us are for our own good, and living by the rules makes you feel really happy and brings you closer to Jesus. So, yeah, I totally get it."

Tamika nodded, her eyes opening wide with excitement. "Exactly! That is exactly how I feel. I mean, this Christmas with my mom, I like, got my act together. I cleaned up our apartment real nice for her. I got her a gift, I even spent time with her, and I swear, Taylor, it was the best Christmas ever. I realized how much I love my mom, and I told her about how much I love the feeling I get when I come to church, and she said she just might come with me."

"Oh, that is very cool, Mika," Taylor said, as her eyes teared up a bit. "So, Teo, he doesn't feel the same way I guess? Is that the big problem?"

Mika shrugged. "That's part of it, but not the worst part. Ya see, so, like, before I started comin' to church, I didn't think much about what Teo was doing."

"What was he doing?"

"So, he gets drugs from this man called T-bone, who was 'Mari's mom's boyfriend. Teo sells the stuff at school and to anyone who comes to him to buy it. I don't do that stuff, but I sort of ignored what Teo was doing, because, ya know, he's so cute and has a lot of clout. But I'm not interested in that anymore."

"I don't blame you, and Mika, that's dangerous stuff."

"I know."

"So, even though Ms. Meeks isn't there anymore, her boyfriend keeps coming around?" Taylor asked.

"Well, he didn't for a almost a week, 'cause you know, he got arrested when he tried to shoot your dad. But they let him right out. They always let him out. I don't get why he always gets out. And as soon as he got out, he brought more drugs to Teo."

"So, you broke up with him because you don't want to be around all that? That's a good thing, Mika."

"Yeah, but that's not exactly the only reason. Ya see, this past year, I didn't know Jesus, right? And so, I mean, me and Teo, we like, we did it, all the time."

Taylor took a few moments to decipher. "Oh, you mean, you guys were having sex?"

Mika nodded. "Girl, you are so innocent, but yeah, right. But then, after Jesus came into my heart, I wanted to stop that and live the way Jesus wants us to live. But Teo wasn't down with that. I wanted him to stay my boyfriend but like, no more messin' around."

Taylor sighed.

"He said if I wanted him to be my boyfriend, then we were gonna keep on the way things were and I didn't know what to say. It was like, I couldn't think of the right words to make him understand. So, then, he got me to let him come over to chill, and then when he tried to start stuff, I told him no, but he forced me."

"Oh, Mika," Taylor said. "That's rape. You know that's rape, right?"

She nodded. "Yeah, but still, I shouldn't have let him come over, so it was my fault too. So, I decided, okay, I guess I'm gonna have to break up with him because I

realized, I don't have any feelings for him. I mean, he's cute, but that's all he's got goin' for him. He's a criminal. He didn't even care that he forced me. He thought it was funny. He actually laughed about it. So, I broke up with him, but he says it's not over."

Taylor nodded. "I heard him say that. So, what are you gonna do?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid that he's not gonna just try to seduce me now. I'm afraid he might actually rape me for real."

"It was really rape the first time he forced you, Mika."

She shrugged.

Taylor sighed. She was out of her league. "Mika, we need to tell someone."

"No! If Teo found out I told someone, he'd probably kill me. I mean, for real kill me."

"Does he have a gun?"

"I haven't seen a gun, but he doesn't need a gun to kill me. He's strong, and he's tricky, and he does have a knife, and I seen him use it."

Taylor nodded. "Okay, so, what if I just talk to my Dad, or my brother, just to see what could be done to keep you safe? I mean, I'll get my dad or brother to promise to not tell the police, and just ask what can be done to help you stay safe. Would you let me do that?"

"I don't know."

"Like, tonight, after the youth meeting, we can walk you home. We can get you some pepper spray. We can get you a camera to wear, so we can see what's happening and have evidence to put him in jail."

"You can do all that?"

"That's just off the top of my head. There's probably a lot more we can do that I don't know about. And Mika, one more thing, you can start taking self-defense courses too."

"I can't afford that."

"It'll be free as long as you come to class and put in some effort."

Mika sighed and looked closely at Taylor. "You do all that stuff, right?"

Taylor nodded. "Yes. I'm a black belt."

"That's extra fire, Taylor."

She smiled. "Thanks. So, Mika, you're a junior right?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?" Taylor asked.

"I'm sixteen."

"So, you know, you're a hit, right? You trended when you sang on the Sunday before Christmas."

She nodded. "I don't know 'bout a hit, but all the comments online were pretty lit."

"That should tell you, Mika, that you have a lot goin' for you. So, that means we gotta keep you safe and you gotta not let Teo mess you up and mess up your life, cuz you have somethin' good goin'."

Mika nodded.

"So, how do you spell Teo? Is it like it sounds, T-A-Y-O? Or, is Teo even his real

name, or is that just a nickname?"

"His name is Matteo." She spelled it for her.

"Last name?" Taylor asked.

"Matteo Peevey, why?"

Taylor nodded. "Because my dad will probably want to run his name and see if he has a record."

"Oh. He can do that?"

Taylor smiled. "Ameritech can do pretty much anything, and my dad is very close friends with the man who owns Ameritech, and my Uncle Joey will one day own the company, so, we kind of have an in."

"You guys are bad powerful."

"Our power comes from God, Mika, and you have the same power."

Both girls looked up when the door opened. Young Eric poked his head in. "Hello there ladies. You guys okay?"

Taylor stood. "We're good."

"Well, a bunch of kids are arriving for the meeting and many of them have asked if you were here. And I mean both of you."

Mika smiled. "Really?"

"Yes ma'am. There's people here that have never been here before, and they came to see that star girl singer and Taylor." He grinned. "And me too."

"I bet," Taylor said with a giggle.

"Do I look okay?" Mika asked.

"You look fantastic," young Eric assured her. "You two come on out because Jordan just arrived and I need to go see my baby." He turned and hurried away to find his girl.

Taylor and Mika giggled. They started out. "I still can't believe I'm talking to Taylor Kino, sister of Eric Kino the third. He's totally hot."

Taylor grinned. "He's a really good guy."

✝✝✝

Still January 8th Wednesday Evening...

The meeting began inside the chapel. Logan Adams along with Zeke Dolan, his drummer, got everyone revved up and jumping with the requested 'Praise' by Elevation Worship. JoJo Adams prayed over the group of kids that ranged in age from age twelve to nineteen. Patrick Barnes, Reverend Clark's twenty-seven-year old grand nephew, came to the front of the group next. Neither Logan, nor JoJo, nor Patrick went up the steps to the podium. Instead they stood on the floor in front of the first pew.

"Hello everyone! For those of you who don't know me, I'm Reverend Clark's grandnephew. My name is Patrick Barnes and most of the kids call me Pastor Pat. I came down to visit my uncle for Christmas and meet him for the first time ever. It's a long story, which most of you probably know if you were at church last Sunday. I'm actually a junior pastor at another church up north, but your church here has so intrigued me that I decided to stick around for awhile." He smiled and looked over the group of about a hundred kids. "You are an awesome group of kids. You may not

realize it, but you have a light about you and I think you're about to accomplish some pretty amazing things."

He nodded and walked back and forth a bit. "So, we won't always meet in the chapel. This is just a getting started kind of thing. Tonight, after some announcements, we're gonna divide up, ages fifteen through nineteen will stay in here, and ages twelve to fourteen will head down into the community room. But first, let me tell you what JoJo and Logan and I have planned. You might have noticed that there is construction going on next door at what used to be a motel. THAT is going to be a new youth ministry center for our church. They're building a gym, that will also double as an auditorium."

He stopped and smiled as it sunk into the kid's minds. "Yeah, so, we're gonna form a church basketball league. We're gonna have some stage shows and some dances. We're gonna have workshops and classes. And we're gonna do it all in a manner that exemplifies how to be a Christian teenager. We're gonna be known as a group of kids who do good things, amazing things. We're gonna take a page from a young duo that I know many of you follow on social media, the Gabe and Taylor dynamic duo. Taylor, will you stand for just a second so everyone knows who you are?"

Taylor stood and smiled at the group. "So, let me just tell you what I know you all really want to know," she said with a smile. "Gabe is coming into town this weekend. He's gonna try to get over here to see you all on some youth nights. I'm pretty sure he's gonna make it next Wednesday, so come and hear his message for you. He will be at church this Sunday."

Pastor Pat nodded. "Awesome, Taylor, thank you. As I was saying, we're gonna take a page or two from his and Taylor's website. We're gonna make everyone in this area know that the kids here are a force for good. We'll do service projects. Help out the old folks and the younger kids. We'll make a difference, not only in our own lives but in everyone's life we come in contact with, and it's gonna be awesome. And it's all gonna go up on the Youth of Hopewood Chapel web page."

The group chatted excitedly and Patrick called them to order. "So, until we get the gym built, we'll make do the best we can. Logan is changing choir practice to Thursday evenings for now. So, let's just talk about these guys a minute," he said as he gestured toward Logan and JoJo. "We're very blessed to have these big names working with us. Logan Adams, who's getting ready to record his first album that will drop this spring. He is gonna want to do a few music videos and he's gonna need some awesome kids to help and I think you guys would fit the bill. Also, his brother, USC's star quarterback who is showing us how we can take a setback and turn it around. Not only is he going to help minister this church, but he is going to be working with kids all over the country to obtain their athletic goals. And also, we have the newest Hollywood Star, Eric Kino the third with us tonight, and he has a little gift for you. Eric, come on up."

Young Eric walked to the front. One could almost hear a collective sigh from the girls. Jordan smiled up at her guy. She didn't blame them. She had to sigh too. She sighed remembering that this guy standing in front of the group was hers. He'd chosen her above all the girls who throw themselves at him on a daily basis. He would be her

husband. He would be the father of her children. She didn't think she could be any happier. He glanced at her and winked. She blushed.

He smiled at the group. "Hello everyone. So, I've had a request from several of you to get you some tickets to my movie that just came out right before Christmas, *The Resurrection of Elijah Beck.* So, I decided to do more than just get you some tickets. I thought, hey— let's have a party! So, this coming Saturday, I've rented out an entire theater. There are several different times for the showings. Popcorn, other snacks and drinks will be complimentary and all you can eat. So, make sure you pick up a voucher from either Pastor Pat, JoJo, Logan or myself before you leave tonight."

He looked out as a hand went up. "Yes?"

"So, can we pick up one for other people in our family?"

"Yes you can, but don't overdo it. Be honest. Or if it's just for you and a friend or two, that's cool too."

"Will you be there?" another person asked.

"Possibly."

"Will Taylor be there?"

Eric frowned at the boy asking the question. "No. She has other plans."

Taylor glanced over at the guy who'd asked the question. She didn't know him but thought maybe he looked familiar. She leaned over to Mika. "Do you know that guy?" she whispered.

Mika nodded. "Yeah, that's Teo's best friend. His name is Anthony, but most just call him T."

"Why do you think he asked about me?"

She shrugged. "Um, I dunno, maybe he likes you."

"I don't even know him."

"Yeah, but you look good, Taylor, and you're famous. That draws attention, ya know?"

Taylor sighed. "Yeah I know. It's the story of my life."

Eric finished speaking and the group divided up.

Mika moved up to join some of her friends from school. Many of them weren't from this neighborhood. The kids came from all over when they heard that Eric Kino will be in attendance.

Taylor stayed where she was. She didn't have any real friends here. When she thought about it, she didn't have very many friends at all. At her own school she really only had acquaintances. There wasn't anyone that she spent time with out of school, not like Gabe had Peyton. She had Jordan who was about to be her sister-in-law. She had Melody and Raylynn who were dating her cousins. Raylynn's sister, Kaylee, was pretty cool. Of course, Phillip and Lyle, Melody's brothers, were friends, but they were guys. She sighed. She wasn't feeling sorry for herself, just realizing that her life was much different than most girls her age.

When someone came to sit next to her she turned and smiled politely. It was the Anthony guy.

"What's up, Taylor?"

She nodded. “Hello.”

“I’m T.”

“Nice to meet you,” Taylor said, knowing it sounded lame.

He chuckled. “Yeah. Well, just thirsty to touch.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure what that means.”

He laughed. “Wow, you are like, out of touch.”

Her eyes narrowed. “If you mean I speak real English, I guess you’re absolutely correct.”

He nodded. “That’s okay. I can dig it.” He reached over and touched her hand. “So, I know you got a boyfriend, but, like, he’s not around, right? Whaddya say, you and me, like take a walk?”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m trying to listen to what they’re saying here. I’m thinking you should be listening too.”

“Why ya say that?”

“Because they’re talking about the way a boy ought to talk to a girl.”

He shrugged. “I know how to talk to a bi... uh, a girl.”

She rolled her eyes. “Let me just be up-front, T. I’m not interested. I have a boyfriend, and I would never go for a walk or anywhere else with someone who’s so disrespectful.”

“Oh, I see. Ya wanna be real. Okay, let’s keep it real. I got Teo’s back— always. So, you need to stay outta his and Mika’s buisness. Got it?”

“Well, T, Mika is my friend, and her business *is* my business and you can’t tell me what to do.”

“Well, Taylor, this is a warning. You might wanna pay attention.”

“Well, T, you don’t scare me.”

“You should be scared.”

She stood to leave and he grabbed her wrist.

“We got a problem here?” young Eric asked.

Both Taylor and T turned to look at the fierce man.

T immediately let go of her wrist. Young Eric nodded. “Good decision.” He sighed. “So, what’s goin’ on?”

“Nada,” T answered flippantly. “We was just havin’ a little talk.”

“Well, I heard you tell her to be scared, which means you’re the one who should be scared.”

“I was just messin’ around.”

Eric sighed. “Listen, you’re welcome to come here and participate, but you may not put your hands on my sister. Not ever. If you do, you’ll be escorted off the property. Are we clear?”

“Sure. No prob. She’s overrated anyway.” He rose. “I’m out.”

Taylor started to speak but her brother held up his hand to silence her as he pulled out his phone.

“Whatcha got, Three?” Joey said, jokingly using Jordan’s pet name for his nephew.

"Uncle Joey, do we have security on the church property right now?"

"Yes, I believe Jeff put them outside. Why?"

"There's a guy leaving the church. He tried to threaten Taylor in some way. Don't know the whole story yet, but I think we're gonna want to know where he lives etcetera."

"Description please."

Eric gave him a full description.

Taylor whispered to him, "his name is Anthony, but he goes by T."

"Name is Anthony. Goes by T," Eric added.

"Copy that. Back shortly."

Eric turned to Taylor. "We need to talk."

Taylor's lip trembled.

"But not now because I have to speak with people and give out tickets. Go sit with Jordan please, so I don't have to worry about you."

"Are you mad?"

"At you? Not at all. At that guy? Absolutely, and it will probably take me a few minutes to calm down."

"Okay, but just so you know, Mika is in danger and I intend to walk her home after the meeting."

"Yeah, well, we'll just have to see about that."

Taylor lifted her chin in determination. "I *will* see her home, Eric. You can come along, but I promised to keep her safe."

"What is she in danger of?"

"It's a long story and you just said you don't have time."

He nodded and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Okay, Tay, we'll take care of it, and we'll make sure she gets home safely."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Go sit with Jordan."

✝✝✝

While the older kids were being schooled in the best way to speak to the opposite sex, the kids downstairs were being primed to do great things. JoJo ushered them down to the community room. They took seats in folding chairs placed in a giant circle. There were about thirty-five kids, JoJo estimated, most of whom he'd never seen before. He smiled at them, greeted every single one of them, shook hands with them, and directed them to take a seat.

Once they were seated, he looked around the giant circle for several seconds, silently asking God to help him to help them. He then nodded and smiled.

"What? Are you trying to figure out what to say to us?" a boy quipped.

The others laughed. JoJo smiled. "A few of you know me personally. Daniel Davis, can you tell them what I was doing?"

Daniel's face turned a little pink for being called on in such a large group of kids. Still, he nodded. "Yes sir."

JoJo prodded him. "Go ahead. What was I doing?"

"You were praying over us."

JoJo smiled. "That's right. So, let's get started. Hello everyone. For those who don't know me, my name is JoJo Adams. Just to give you perspective, Logan upstairs, is my brother. Young Eric Kino the third and his sister Taylor are my cousins. My father's younger brother is Joey Adams, who is my uncle. The same Joey Adams who did some movies with Ricky Kino and who fought in and won a bunch of Kino Challenges and now helps run Ameritech Security. Ricky Kino is my uncle. His wife, Breanna Adams Kino is my aunt. My father is Mark Adams, he's an attorney, and also a Kino Challenge Champion. My mother is Bella Adams, and to me, she's the best mom in the world. I have a little sister, Emily, who is four.

"Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace, is my father's little sister and she is my aunt, and her husband, Cameron Wallace, my uncle, is a JETT."

"What's a jet?"

"He's like, special forces. My Uncle Joey is also a JETT. My grandfather is Grandmaster Eric Kino, and my grandmother is Shelley Kino who was a MART champion back in the day. I was the USC quarterback for the past three years, but I was put out with a shoulder injury. I was gonna go pro, but that's over, and so now, I get the amazing opportunity to talk to young people like yourselves and that, to me, is a great privilege."

He drew a deep breath and smiled. "So, there's a lotta kids here, which is awesome, and I WAS praying over you for a moment, so why do you think I was doing that?"

"Um, cuz we need all the prayers we can get?" Lyle Keith jested.

"Well, that is true about all of us, but I was praying over you because this group, you kids right here, you are so much more important than you think. Now, what I want you to do right now, is go around the circle and count off so I know exactly how many kids we have today. He turned to Daniel Davis who sat on his right. "Dan, you're number one. He pointed to Jeremy Davis."

"Two," Jeremy said.

JoJo waited for them to finish. There turned out to be forty-two kids. It was a diverse group. Each kid was unique. There seemed to be a few more boys than girls, which was odd, but cool. JoJo nodded. "Okay. Forty-two. Wow. That's more than I thought. Awesome! So, next, I want you go around and introduce yourself. Give us your name, your age, what school you attend, or if you're home-schooled, and if you'd like, tell us a little something about yourself. I mean, like, hey, I'm JoJo Adams, I'm fourteen, I go to Newport High School and I like to play football. Or, I'm Breanna Adams, I'm twelve, and I'm into drama. Got it?" He nodded and turned to his left this time and gestured to a pretty girl. "Let's start with you."

She immediately blushed. "Oh. Okay. Do we have to stand up?"

"No, unless you want to stand. Either way is cool with me."

She stayed in her seat. "Okay, well, I'm Ava, I'm thirteen. I go to Huntington Middle School, and I like to surf."

JoJo nodded. "Awesome. Good job, Ava. Next."

They went around the entire circle. JoJo listened intently, trying to pick up on nuances. Who was shy. Who was definitely not shy. Who was a leader. Who had some self-esteem issues. As they went around he realized, he'd like to have a private conversation with every single one of them.

When the last one finished, which was Daniel Davis, JoJo smiled. "What Daniel didn't tell you, is that today is actually his thirteenth birthday. So, happy birthday, Dan. Daniel's mom provided the giant birthday cake that's sitting over there on the counter and we'll dive into that later. You'll notice when we do, that there's another name on the cake. That is his brother, Jeremy, and that is because his birthday is in two days, on the tenth, so we're gonna sing to them both a little later. Do we have anymore birthdays that have recently happened or will happen this week? No? Okay. If anyone has a birthday coming up, please let me know, and we'll make it a tradition to celebrate with you on Wednesday nights."

JoJo looked around. "Just full disclosure, I personally know three of the kids here. Daniel here, and his brother Jeremy, are like family to me. Their father is a very good friend of our family and I love these guys like they are my own little brothers. And, Lyle Keith, the soon to be *Oceanside High School* varsity QB over there, is the brother of *my* brother's girlfriend, and their family is very close to our family too, and I love *him* like a brother. So, what that means, is not that Dan, Jeremy and Lyle are special. It actually means, that I'm gonna expect a whole lot more from them. Got it, guys?"

The three boys laughed. "Yes sir, JoJo, sir," Daniel quipped.

"Good. Now, someone tell me, how does it make you feel to be in this younger group, separate from the older kids upstairs?"

When no one answered, he smiled. "Come on, now. Be honest. How do you feel about it? There is no wrong answer. I just want to gage how you're feeling about it."

JoJo glanced at Lyle and nodded.

Lyle sat up straight. "Well, to be honest, it makes me feel like, man, I missed the cutoff by four months. Cuz I'll be fifteen May 5th."

"And you'd rather be with the older kids?"

He shrugged. "I guess."

"Why?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I guess it feels like, we're not as important. Or like, ya know, we have to sit at the kid's table at Thanksgiving."

JoJo laughed. "Good description. And thank you for being so honest, Lyle. And thanks for speaking up, because being a good quarterback means being a good leader. So, point for you."

"Just one?" Lyle quipped.

The group chuckled.

JoJo looked around, his eyes shining. "So, listen up guys, because what I'm about to say is important. This group is ultra special. I'm not sure why yet. I was hurt in that last season game, and poof, just like that, my pro career was gone. But that wasn't bad luck. That was God, working out His plan for me. I'm supposed to be right here, working with you kids. You younger ones, are actually more important than the ones

upstairs, in some ways. They've already passed this time when how you conduct yourself can make or break you. They're working on other things. Right now, what they're doing, is learning the best way to speak to someone of the opposite sex. How to talk to a girl respectfully. How to talk to a boy and remain true to yourself.

"But us down here, we're about to learn that you, as young people, can make a huge difference. You're about to learn how to work a room. How to be a leader, even if you're a little shy. And not only be a leader, but how to influence a whole nation, a lot like Gabe Tanner did, though he was older than you. You guys are so important, and if Reverend Clark asked me to change up and work with the older kids instead, I would respectfully ask to stay here with you, because we are about to light– this– place– up."

He smiled. "In my family, we are very competitive. Go figure. Everything gets turned into a competition and we don't hold back. Even if it's just a backyard volleyball game, we go at it full force. So, we're gonna turn this into a competition of sorts. Can this younger group down here outdo, shine brighter, be more dynamic than the ones upstairs? I think you absolutely can. So, let's begin with a few rules.

"We can be competitive, but we cannot be bad sports. That's the rule in our family. We play with honor. No anger. No temper. You know our whole family are martial artists, and *Kino Martial Arts* is big on integrity and honor. It's core. And that's the way our youth group here, the under fifteens, that's the way we will operate. With honor."

"So, like, are you a black belt?" one of the boys asked.

JoJo nodded. "I'm a third degree black belt."

"Cool. Will you show us some stuff?"

"One day. Right now, I'm rehabbing my shoulder. I should be back in business by March. Then, if you want, we'll do a demo for you guys."

The boy nodded.

"Anyway, what I was getting at is this; we are at this church on a Wednesday evening because we are Christians. We are followers of Jesus Christ, and we need to learn how to go about our everyday lives being holy and exemplary and living in a way that shows the world that Christians are not hypocrites. Did you know that's how a lot of people think of Christians? They think that Christians go to church on Sunday and act all good and stuff, but then they go back to school and act like everyone else. They curse. They lie. They make fun of someone. They cheat on a test. They dis people.

"I want this group, to be different. I want us to always have our faith foremost in our minds. I want us to live in a way that the Holy Spirit will dwell in us always, and change our hearts and our actions, because setting a good example for others, living in love and kindness and righteousness, yet being strong and fearless, that is how Jesus would have us live. That example is how we bring others into the fold to be believers in Jesus themselves. That saves them. That saves them from a life of darkness and pain and sadness.

"Now, doing this is not always an easy thing to do. Peer pressure, and not wanting to stand out, or be made fun of, keeps us from really living what we believe, and over the course of this year, we're gonna come to understand more deeply what we actually believe as followers of Christ.

"So, what we're gonna work on tonight is how to enter a room, how to work a room, and how to have confidence in yourself, so that others are not dictating what you should do or say, but YOU are influencing them instead. Now, I'm gonna show you how to enter a room full of people, how to work the room and how to make a difference. And when the older kids join us later, you're gonna practice on them."

"Ooooh," a few of the girls murmured.

JoJo smiled. "It doesn't matter that you're younger. You can still shine brighter. Look at David in the Bible. He was just a kid. All his older brothers were warriors, but it was young David, a boy left behind to tend the sheep, it was him who slew Goliath, it was him who became King of Israel, and it was him who is a prominent figure in the Bible. Where did he get his strength?" JoJo nodded at the mumbled answer. "That's right. He got it from God. The same God that is with you guys right now. The same God who will be with you as you learn to enter a room with strength and light and love emanating from your very being. Okay, let's get to it. Everybody on your feet."

✝✝✝

Pastor Patrick Barnes dismissed the group and had them head downstairs for refreshments and birthday cake. Some immediately hit the restroom. Others headed quickly downstairs. Bristol headed into the church office. Melody saw her, and stuck her head in.

"Hey, Bristol. You're not gonna go down and have some cake?"

Bristol smiled at her friend. "Hey, Melody. I was just grabbing my purse and I wanted to see if I need to touch up my makeup or anything."

Melody looked her friend over. Bristol was a pretty girl. She was Filipino. If one were to google hot Filipino girls, Bristol's picture would come up. But her ex-boyfriend, Banoy Cruz, had done a number on her and she was very unaware of her own beauty. He'd said she was ugly because he had no appreciation for the beautiful girls of his own culture. Of course, it didn't help that her clothes were drab and old-fashioned. Melody had a feeling that Bristol shopped at the local Goodwill. Melody herself had done that many times, but sweet Bristol really had no sense of style. She usually wore old skirts with a blouse or black yoga pants with a t-shirt, which was what she had on tonight.

Melody smiled at Bristol and came closer. "I didn't even realize you were wearing makeup. You're so pretty just naturally."

Bristol rolled her eyes. "Riight. Well, I'm wearing some mascara and some stuff to keep the shine off, and a little lip gloss."

"And that's perfect. So, Bristol, why the sudden interest in makeup?"

Bristol looked down and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I have a new job, I represent the church, I'm starting school next week, and..."

"And?"

"Nothing."

"Bristol, and what?"

Bristol shook her head. "Nothing really. But like..." She stopped again.

Melody could see her face turning pink. "Come on, Bristol, you can tell me. I'm

your friend, right?"

Bristol nodded.

"So, do you like someone?"

Bristol smiled. "Maybe."

Melody smiled. "Really? Okay, so that's awesome. Who is it?"

Bristol shook her head. "I'm not gonna say right now."

"Is it Ryder?" Melody asked immediately. Nineteen-year-old Ryder was hard for any girl to pass up. He'd been homeless up until a few days before Christmas. He was now living at Logan's house while he was getting his life in order. Once he'd cleaned up, it was amazing how good he looked.

Bristol shook her head. "No, it's not Ryder, though he is very cute. Mel, just get it through your head that I'm not gonna tell you right now. Let me just take this slow, okay?"

Melody nodded her head and thought. "Okay, but whoever it is, Bristol, let me help you."

"Help me how?"

Melody hoped she wasn't about to upset her. "Well, I mean, let's go shopping and get some new clothes. You need some new clothes to wear to school, right?"

Bristol sighed. "It would be nice, but I can't afford anything right now."

"Well, I can, because I'm rolling in dough," Melody said with a giggle. "The Kinos pay me well, and I've been meaning to buy some new jeans and some cute shirts. Come with me and I'll treat you."

"I can't let you do that."

"Why not, Bristol? Am I your friend or not? I don't mean to act like you're a charity case or anything, but let me do this. I haven't been much of a friend to you, I've been so busy with Logan. Let's do this. Let's go out and get in style."

Bristol bit her lip as she thought, and then finally smiled. "Okay, Melody, you talked me into it. Let's do this. But I have to warn you, I don't know much about how to get in style."

"That's okay, because I don't either, but I'm learning from Jordan and Taylor. Maybe I'll bring them along."

Bristol smiled. "That would be fun."

Melody grinned because Bristol took the bait. "Yeah it would. Girl's day out shopping. Oh, this is gonna be great."

"Well, come on, Mel, let's go down and sing happy birthday to the Davis brothers. They're so adorable."

Melody nodded. "They really are so cute. In a few years, they won't be able to fight the girls off."

✝✝✝

Proverbs 27:9

"Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness
of a friend comes from his earnest counsel."

Chapter Two

January 8th, Wednesday Evening
Hopewood Chapel, Youth Night, Huntington Beach, California

Taylor stood off to the side of the community room. She was watching some strange phenomena. She first noticed Daniel Davis, walking around, trying to shake people's hands. He was smiling and nodding his head as people were wishing him a happy birthday. He was chatting with them and then turning and getting someone else's attention and then introducing that someone else to the first person he was talking to.

She turned to find Jeremy Davis. He too was chatting away merrily with a couple of girls who were in the older group. Glancing around, she saw Lyle Keith doing the same. And many other young ones doing the same. They would chat for a minute, ask a question or two, and then move on. Taylor smiled. She recognized what was happening. They were working the room. She recognized it because usually she was the one doing it.

Her cousins, JoJo and Logan were also working the room. And Pastor Barnes was doing the same. Raylynn, JoJo's new girlfriend, was videoing, walking around, getting people to say hello to her camera. Ryder, who for now was like a foster brother to JoJo and Logan, was also videoing the interactions happening around the room. Taylor nodded in approval. She was pretty sure, JoJo had directed what was happening.

Taylor shifted her attention to Kaylee, who was Raylynn's younger sister. She was almost completely healed. Now that the bruises were gone and there was no more swelling, it was easy to see that the eighteen-year-old, native American college student was a knockout. She was holding court in a circle of five guys, smiling and laughing at their jokes. Taylor knew that she used to be promiscuous and that what happened to her, beat almost to death by her boyfriend, had been a catalyst for her to change. Taylor's grandfather and Aunt Jeffy also had a lot to do with that.

Taylor's eyes shifted to Mika who was standing with three of her girlfriends as they ate a small plate of goodies. Mika smiled and nodded at whatever they were saying, and then turned when Lyle Keith approached her. He smiled and introduced himself. Taylor was interested in what he was saying and moved closer so she could hear.

"Yeah, I'm a freshman. I'm Phillip's younger brother, I think he's your age. I've just been meaning to tell you that when you sang in church a few weeks ago, you blew me away. You are so good!"

Mika giggled. "Oh, thanks, what was your name again?"

"I'm Lyle." He turned and smiled at the other girls and held out his hand. "What's your names?"

They each said their name and went ahead and almost reluctantly shook his hand,

but he didn't seem deterred. He smiled. "It's like, nice to meet all of you. You're all juniors, right?"

They all nodded.

"Well, come out to the football games next year, cuz hopefully I'm gonna be the quarterback and I'll need someone to cheer for me."

Taylor giggled and moved forward. "Hey Lyle, how's it goin'?"

The girls all turned to smile at Taylor. Taylor nodded at them. "I see you've met one of my good friends. Lyle and his brother, Phillip, they escorted me to the Christmas dance at my school a few weeks ago. They're the best. And Lyle here can really dance."

The girls all turned and looked at Lyle with fresh eyes and nodded at him. He might only be a freshman, but he was pretty cute, with his light brown hair and his boyish smile.

Lyle grinned at Taylor. "Thanks, Taylor. Taking you to a dance, it was the highlight of the whole month."

Taylor grinned. "Well, once they get the gym built, we're gonna have a lot more dances, so you'll have to save a few of those dances for me."

"I think I can do that," he said with a laugh. "Hey, I see a cute girl over there I've been wanting to meet. I'm gonna go talk to her. Wish me luck," he said, directing his words to the group of girls.

They all laughed and told him to "go get her," and he left the group.

Taylor watched him go. She was thinking that her cousin JoJo was an amazing youth minister. The girls all started asking her questions about her life, and then they got around, as always, to asking about Gabe. She chatted for a few minutes until the group started to diminish as one by one kids left the gathering. Bristol and Melody and Jordan started cleaning up the refreshments and wiping down the countertops of the kitchen and bar area that separated the community room from the kitchen.

Mika smiled at Taylor. "Well, I guess I need to get home. My mom should be home by now."

Taylor nodded. "There's so much cake left over. Why don't you take a piece for her?" She didn't give her a chance to turn it down. "I'll get it. Just a minute."

Taylor hurried away and came back a minute later with a plate holding a huge piece of cake covered with some plastic wrap.

"Oh! Wow, thanks, Taylor."

"Hold on, I'm gonna walk you home," Taylor ordered.

Mika frowned. "Why?"

"I told you, we will find a way to keep you safe. I'm not letting you walk home alone. I'm gonna make sure you get all the way into your apartment and all locked up, safe and sound."

Mika frowned. "You don't have to do that. I'll probably be okay."

"Probably? Do you think Teo will be out there somewhere waiting on you to come back?"

Mika shrugged. "Maybe. Sometimes I don't see him for days and then sometimes he's always hanging around."

"Well, I'm not taking any chances," Taylor said. "I'm gonna make sure you're safe. He doesn't have a right to do whatever he wants with you. Let me ask you something, Mika, so, in the mornings, does he bug you then?"

She shrugged. "Well, usually I would see him at the bus stop and we sit together on the bus, except he got a car now, so he wants to take me to school."

"So, you'll go back to riding the bus?"

Mika shrugged. "I guess."

"So, what if he decided to go with you to the bus stop?"

"He might do that."

Taylor frowned. "And he might try to get you to ride with him instead."

Mika only sighed, because that too was a possibility.

"Well, what if you don't ride the bus anymore?" Taylor asked.

"How am I supposed to get to school?"

Taylor sighed. "I'm gonna send a car for you tomorrow and then I'll talk to my dad and find out how we're gonna protect you."

"You can't do this forever."

"We may not have to. He might eventually give up. He might figure out that it's really over and move on."

Mika nodded. "Yeah, he might. I mean, before me, he had lots of other girlfriends. He moved on from them well enough I guess, though he broke up with them. They didn't break up with him."

Taylor nodded. "Good point. If you're ready to go, let me grab my brother." She turned to go find Eric.

Outside the church, Eric, Taylor and Mika met up with an Ameritech agent. Eric shook his hand. "Agent?"

The man nodded. "Yes, I'm Agent Thomas. Nice to meet you Eric."

"You too. This is my sister Taylor and her friend Mika. It's Mika we're concerned about right now. Just want to get her home safely."

"And the circumstances?"

Eric looked to Taylor for the explanation.

She sighed. "Oh, well, I mean, I don't want to embarrass Mika."

"Well, the more I know about the circumstances, the better I can protect her. You don't have to go into detail. Just the basics."

Taylor nodded. "Yes sir. So, um, Mika's boyfriend has already raped her and she broke up with him and earlier this evening I heard him tell her that's it's not over and she's afraid he might rape her again and he's a punk and he sells drugs at school and he has friends that will help him and one of the those friends threatened me today."

"He did?" Mika asked, surprised.

Taylor nodded. "Yes. Anthony told me I'd better mind my own business and that I should be afraid of him."

"Oh, Taylor, I'm sorry he did that. He's such a loser."

"We have his information," Agent Thomas said. "We'll be keeping an eye on the young man. For now, let's get you home. We're just gonna walk you home and we'll

see what kind of attention you attract."

Mika nodded. "I doubt Teo will approach me if I'm walking with someone."

The agent grabbed a black bag and slung it over his shoulder.

"What about Jordan?" Taylor asked.

"She's gonna stay at the church with the bros until I get back," Eric said.

The four turned around and headed toward the drive that led down to the apartments. The walk was dark. There was only one street light up on the main road. The next light was all the way down by the first apartment building.

"Meeks," they heard someone call as they were about twenty feet from that first building.

"Oh, Lord," Mika muttered. She looked over toward the low wall where Teo liked to sit, so he could watch people as they come and go out of the apartments.

She stopped and saw him hop down off the wall and brazenly head toward her. "Teo," she said sternly. "I don't want to talk to you. I'm going home. It's late and I'm tired."

He came forward out of the shadows, his eyes narrowed as he looked over her companions. He smiled. "Taylor. Lookin' good."

She rolled her eyes.

Teo ignored both young Eric and the agent and reached out to try to grab Mika's hand, but she pulled away.

The agent stepped forward to block him and Teo looked up at him as if seeing him for the first time.

"Who you?"

He smiled. "Just a friend of Mika's. She said she's tired and doesn't want to talk to you, so back off."

"I dunno who..."

"Just stop, Teo. We broke up. It's over."

"You not gonna just dis me like this."

"Why? You don't really care about me. And I'm changin' directions. Let's call it done."

He started to reach for her again, but Agent Thomas reached out and caught his arm and held it fast. It was only then that Teo actually looked down at the emblem on his breast pocket. "You some kind of cop or somethin'?"

"Or somethin'," Agent Thomas said. "Now, backoff."

Teo pulled his arm away and stepped back. He glanced at Taylor and Eric, then looked back at Mika. "You get all carried away just because they let you sing. You messin' up, Meeks. Big time. It's not over," he said again as he backed further away.

"It IS OVER," she yelled. "It's over. It's over, TEO. So, just stop. Just stop!"

"Alright, now, settle down," Agent Thomas said softly. "Come on," he said as he led her away.

They headed to B-4. B building, instead of beside building A, was behind building A, separated by a large backyard that both building's back doors opened up onto. So, they had to walk around to the front of building B. There was a brass number four on

the front door. Mika unlocked the door and stepped in.

"May I meet your mother?" Agent Thomas asked.

"Oh, well, I don't know..."

"Mika? Who is it?"

Mika's mother came to the door.

Mika's facial expression was one of horror or dread. "Oh, Mom, it's just some friends who walked me home."

Her mother smiled. "Hello. I'm Tori Burton," she said. "I'm Mika's mother."

"Hello, Mrs. Burton, I'm Taylor Kino," Taylor said quickly as she smiled at the very pretty woman.

"Oh my goodness, yes, it's so nice to meet you. I saw you at church."

Taylor smiled kindly. "It's nice to meet you too, Mrs. Burton. And this is my brother, Eric Kino."

Young Eric stepped forward and offered his hand, which she shook. "Oh wow, it's really you."

He smiled kindly.

"And I'm Agent Thomas, Mrs. Burton," the agent said quickly.

Tori smiled at the handsome man. "Agent?"

"Yes ma'am. I work for Ameritech Security and I am sorry to be pushy, but could we come in for just a moment? I have something to discuss with you but it won't take long."

Taylor didn't know the agent intended to do this. She looked at Mika's face and knew she was terrified of what the agent would disclose. She glanced up at her brother who had a look of resignation on his face.

"Oh, yes, of course, I didn't mean to be rude. Please come in."

They all went in and the door was closed. The apartment was clean and neat.

"Please have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"No ma'am," Taylor said. "We just pigged out on birthday cake. As a matter of fact, Mika brought you a piece."

Mika held up the plate and went to put it on the table.

"Mrs. Burton, I won't keep you long," the agent said. "We walked your daughter home because we were worried about her safety. She might not have told you yet, but she recently broke up with her boyfriend and..."

"You did?" Tori asked her daughter.

Mika sighed and nodded. "Yes, Mom. I found out some things about him and he's not a good guy. I want to change my life. And he's not part of that change."

Her mother smiled. "Okay. Well, that's good, right?"

"Yes ma'am, your daughter is being very strong," Agent Thomas went on. "But her now ex-boyfriend has made threatening remarks to her and Miss Taylor here was concerned for her friend, and she reached out to her brother and he reached out to me. They didn't mean to intrude. Their only thought was just that we make sure she gets home safely tonight, but, I'm a professional ma'am, and I have to do more than that."

"Do you really think he will follow through on those threats?" Tori asked. "I mean,

he's just a kid whose feelings are hurt, right?"

The agent frowned. "Well, ma'am, he walked up to Mika as we were walking her home and tried to grab her and pull her away when she told him she didn't want to talk to him, and I'm thinking if he would do that in front of three other people, then he will probably follow through on threats to harm her in some way. Do you understand? He either thinks he has free reign to do what he wants with no consequences, or he's out of control and doesn't care about the consequences."

She nodded. "Ya know, I never would've thought that Matteo would harm my daughter."

Mika's eyes filled.

"And so, Mrs. Burton, with your permission, I'd like to take some precautions to help keep Mika safe."

"How are you gonna do that?"

"Well, first, I have some security cameras I'd like to place just outside your door, with you permission, of course. And I have a new lock to put on your door which would make it very hard for him to try to bash his way inside your home. I'm not saying he would do that, but better safe than sorry. We would also like to arrange a car to take Mika to and from school until we know this has all blown over. And if Mika would consent to wear it, I can get her a necklace that has a camera in it that can be activated with a quick touch and also doubles as a GPS tracker so that we can keep watch over her, again, until this all blows over."

Tori Burton's eyes opened wide. "Wow, so, how much will this cost?"

"It won't cost you a thing, ma'am," young Eric said quickly. "It's taken care of. Taylor was concerned for Mika and felt strongly that we need to take whatever means necessary to protect her."

"And just like that, you take care of it?"

"Well, yes ma'am. When God places something, or someone, in our path, we try to act quickly to do whatever He asks of us."

"Mom, please don't let this worry you," Mika said softly.

"It's hard to not worry."

"Mrs. Burton," Taylor began. "Really, please don't worry. You see, God must be very aware of you and Mika or He wouldn't have put it on our hearts to step in. I have a feeling you and Mika are very special to Him. So that means, He will be with you and looking after you and He doesn't want you to worry. Trust Him. He's got you."

Young Eric smiled at his sister.

Mika watched her mother. She seemed very touched by what Taylor said, and Mika felt grateful for the girl. She wasn't shallow like one might expect the daughter of movie stars to be.

"So, ma'am," Agent Thomas jumped back in. "If I have the okay from you, I'll set up the security camera and put the new lock on your door and then get out of your way."

"Oh! You want to do it right now?"

"Yes ma'am. I have what I need right here in my pack and it will only take me a

few minutes."

"Okay, well, yes, please go ahead, and thank you."

"Agent Thomas do you need my help?" Eric asked.

"Nope. Thanks, but no. You go on ahead, Eric. I know people are waiting on you up at the church."

"Well, sir, I'm not sure that I want to leave you alone," Eric said quietly.

Thomas smiled. "I appreciate the concern, but I have backup keeping watch outside over little ol' me."

Young Eric nodded with a smile. "I should've known that. Okay then, Tay and I will get out of here."

Taylor stood and hugged Mika. "See you Sunday, Mika."

"Thanks Taylor, for worrying about me and making all this happen."

"You don't have to thank me. You're my friend and I actually care about you. It's all gonna be okay." She turned and smiled at Mika's mom. "Good night, Mrs. Burton. It was nice to meet you."

"You too. Good night."

Eric shook Mrs. Burton's hand and Agent Thomas' hand and bid them goodnight. Outside, as they walked up the drive he realized an agent was out in the parking lot, watching over the premises and another agent began to tail young Eric and Taylor as they walked back to the church.

"Okay, Tay, so, you wanna tell me exactly what all of this is about?"

She nodded and began to fill him in on everything. When she finished, she frowned. "Ya know, I didn't get a chance to tell anyone else about this, so I'm confused as to how Agent Thomas knew so much. I mean, he acted like he knew the situation already."

Eric nodded. "Yeah, he did, didn't he? Though he didn't know it all because he had to ask why Mika needed protection. He probably knew some because, remember, I gave Uncle Joey some information earlier on the Anthony guy. Maybe he ran some names and found out something. I'm sure he'll let us know. But anyway, Tay, I'm glad you acted quickly. I have a feeling if we hadn't been around to walk Mika home, she would have been in some serious trouble tonight. Especially since now you tell me this Teo kid is not just some innocent high school kid. Your instincts were right on, sis. I'm proud of you. And by the way, I'm also proud of what you said to Mrs. Burton, that God sees her and is with her and to trust Him. That was well done."

She sighed. "Thanks. I think Mika might be upset with me though. I'm thinkin' her mom doesn't know that she's been having relations with Teo and I'm also thinking that she doesn't want her mom to know."

"Well, sometimes the whole truth has gotta come out before we can make real changes in our lives. Ya know, like Brook. Nothing would have changed if Aunt Jeffy didn't pick up on what really happened."

Taylor nodded. "Ya know, Eric, sometimes the world seems so dark and miserable and scary. And then..."

When she didn't go on, he looked down at her. "And then what?"

She smiled. “And then Gabe appears and all I see is light.”

He grinned. His sister was smitten. “Gabe is definitely a ray of light, but ya know, you can’t depend on Gabe for *your* light. It has to come from Jesus. You need that light so you can be a light for Gabe too. So don’t forget to pray and talk to Jesus and build that relationship.”

She nodded. “I won’t forget. I promise.”

✝✝✝

January 9th 7:00 PM Thursday Evening

Hopewood Chapel Church of Christ, Huntington Beach, California

Ricky and Bree looked around the community room at the people they hoped to help. People whom God had placed in their path. The room was packed full. Though there were forty-eight units in the apartments next door, only thirty nine of them had been occupied. That turned out to be a good thing, because after the architect designed the renovation, they wanted to change the four apartment buildings from holding twelve units each to holding ten units.

There were currently sixty-eight people in the room plus Ricky, Bree and six AMTs. Every tenant was represented by at least one person, though some brought the whole family. That was probably because it had been announced that dinner boxes from *Pete’s* would be provided. The crowd had finished their meal and now some were chatting with each other. Some were sitting quietly with pleasant looks on their faces. Some were not looking quite so friendly. Those were probably worried that something bad was coming, like, eviction.

Taylor had been dropped off after dance class and was sitting next to Mika’s mom, Tori Burton. Mika herself was upstairs at choir practice. Taylor had been chatting with Mrs. Burton and having her point out all the people coming in and telling Taylor what she knew about them. Many of them Taylor already knew, or knew of.

Coming in late and taking a seat in the back, was Ms. Peevey, Matteo’s mother, wearing the uniform of a local grocery store. Mrs. Burton pointed her out to Taylor. She was glad that neither Teo nor T had shown. It was also pointed out to Taylor that the woman sitting next to Ms. Peevy was Ms. Brown, T’s mom. Taylor looked her over. She was a larger woman with green hair, a nose ring and wore a rainbow colored sweater.

Leonard and Paula Garcia were present. Their son, Caleb, was sitting with his friend, Shawn Peevey, who happened to be Teo’s little brother. Also sitting with Caleb and Shawn were a few other kids, including Amari and Brittney, who the Kinos brought along to see their friends. All the chairs faced the large, newly installed, eighty-six inch monitor on the wall.

The Garcias watched the Kinos. They’d been greeting latecomers, inviting them in, offering them dinner boxes and bottles of water. They were always so gracious. It was amazing to Leonard and Paula that these two billionaire movies stars interacted with people in such a warm and friendly way. They seemed like just regular people. Ricky Kino glanced at his watch and nodded at his wife. They met together off to the side of the room and whispered to each other. They put their heads together as they

spoke and Leonard realized they were praying.

They raised their heads at the same time and smiled into each other's eyes. Leonard nodded his own head and then glanced down at his wife sitting next to him. She too had been watching and then looked up at him. "They are so sweet," she whispered.

Leonard smiled. "They set a good example."

Ricky Kino cupped his wife's face with one hand in a loving gesture, nodded his head, then turned and walked to the front of the crowd. There was silence, which made him smile.

"Hello everyone. I'm Ricky Kino."

The group chuckled.

He gestured toward Bree. "And I'm sure you know, this is my lovely wife, Breanna Adams Kino."

They all applauded her, and Ricky nodded in appreciation.

"First, I want to thank you all for coming out to this meeting. We have a lot to cover so I'll get right to it. When Bree and I first drove through your apartment complex last month, I think it was the second week of December, we felt the Holy Spirit move us to do some of God's work there, among his people. We looked into it and we were able to negotiate a deal, thanks to the expertise of my brother, Mark Adams. So, Bree and I would like to announce that we are the new owners of the *Village Garden Apartments.*"

He stopped and waited for the murmurs to die down. "So, let me just say this right away, in case you're worried, no one is going to take away your home. You are secure. However, your homes are going to improve very much because we *are* going to renovate the entire complex."

He waited again. "We've had inspectors look the place over. We know the previous owners wouldn't fix things. We know some of you haven't had a working oven for months. There are water leaks and water damage. There are broken windows, broken doors that should have been repaired long ago, along with just regular wear and tear that should be seen to. New roofs are needed on all four buildings. So, Bree and I want you to know that all of these things are going to be taken care of, but much, much more.

"When I say renovation, I'm talking about a major overhaul. Every single unit in every single building will be completely redone. New carpet, new kitchen, new bathrooms, fresh paint and designs, new lighting. Once we're done you won't recognize the place. Now, I'm gonna turn the next few minutes over to my wife."

Bree came forward with her beautiful smile in place. She nodded at her daughter and the large monitor turned on. "Hello everyone. If you'll all direct your eyes up to the screen."

There was a large murmuring as they studied what was on the screen.

"This," Bree began, "is a computer generated mockup of what the apartments will look like when we finish."

They were looking at beautiful sand-colored brick buildings with charcoal gray

trim. Each building had five gabled porticos that covered five front porches. Each porch was divided in half and had two doors that led to two separate apartments. The porches were surrounded by thick cedar railings and columns to support the gabled roof. Outside those railings was green grass and landscaping and then sidewalks that led out to the parking lot. It was lovely and homey. There was beautiful exterior lighting, on the left of the door on the left, and on the right of the door on the right. The dark gray shutters and roofs added a perfect accent.

Bree smiled as they murmured and exclaimed over the beautiful design. "You might notice something a little off. If not, let me explain." She pointed to the image on the screen. "This is an actual second floor. The two small bedrooms on the first floor will be combined to make one larger bedroom and a larger bathroom. Upstairs, there will be two bedrooms and one bathroom. So, each apartment will become a three bedroom, or the other bedrooms can used as an office, playroom, etcetera."

"Wow. Amazing. You gotta be kidding me. Oh this is lovely."

Bree smiled at the comments. "Let's take a look inside."

She went through pictures of what the interior will look like. The people seemed pleased.

"Will the rent go up?" a man in the back asked.

Ricky stood. "No. Everyone who is currently living here will pay the same rent for the next five years. Anyone new coming in, will pay a slightly higher rent so that we can eventually break even. Still, there will be several things that will change for you. One, is that some of you will have a different address. Because we are doing away with two units in each building to make room for what we want to do, your apartment number could change."

"What else is gonna change?" an elderly woman asked.

Ricky smiled at her. "Hello, Miss Etta. Another thing that will change is security. This complex is about to become a gated community."

There were some sharp intakes of breath. He plowed on.

"One of the very first things we're gonna install, is a front security gate. Not just anyone can come into your community anymore. They'll have to be buzzed in by you. The gate will open automatically for your car because you'll have a transponder on the windshield. If you're walking, you'll have a code to punch in and there will be facial recognition but we'll talk more about that later. The gate will be manned by security agents. They will keep a close eye over all of you, making sure you are all safe and that you can get in and out with no problems."

Tori Burton smiled. The agent had told her last night that they would make sure that her daughter is safe. This morning, Tori had already left for work, but Mika texted her to let her know that a car came to the front of their apartment and picked her up. And now this. These people really do seem to be angels.

Ricky went on. "There will be security cameras covering the entire complex and lighting and fences around the total area that leads all the way up to the front gate. There will even be security cameras at each dumpster area. And by the way, the dumpsters will be larger, they will be hidden neatly on a pad behind a cedar privacy

fence and they will be emptied on a regular basis. There will be a maintenance crew that keeps the pads and surrounding area scrubbed clean and the cameras will alert us to anyone trying to vandalize your property. Taylor, will you put up the mockups of the entire complex from an aerial view?"

She pressed some buttons and the screen switched to a landscapers view of the property.

Ricky moved forward with a pointer. "Okay, let's take a look at the property overall. First, all of the parking lot area will be repaved, new lines painted and as I said earlier, new lighting installed. These are the four apartment buildings. There will be some nice landscaping here and here, though it may not look exactly like it does here on this model." He moved the pointer. "This is the backyard area between the back door of buildings A and B, and then over here is the backyard area between the back doors of buildings C and D. They will have new sod, new kid-friendly landscaping and some picnic areas. Each unit has a back patio. This here and here, are small play areas and swings for the little ones, toddlers and babies. They are right here in the back yard areas so that moms don't have to walk a long way to the larger playgrounds to allow their little ones to get some fresh air and some play time."

"Oh, that is gonna be awesome to just go out the back door without having to pack up stuff," one of the young mothers exclaimed aloud.

Others nodded in agreement.

Ricky changed direction, up here across the parking lot along the outer edge, on each side, you'll notice what looks like four more apartment buildings, but that's not what they are. These are storage buildings to coincide with each apartment unit."

There was a surprised gasp.

Bree smiled and nodded. "Most people don't have enough storage, right? But now you'll have a place to store your Christmas decorations, or memory boxes, or whatever you need to store, bikes, sports equipment, furniture, whatever."

"And what's that, along the parking lot between the storage buildings on each side?" a teen boy asked.

Ricky grinned as he looked at the blue colored rectangle, with two half circles and a line dividing the rectangle in half. "Let's see now, what does it look like to you guys?"

The boy shrugged. "Well, it actually looks like basketball courts."

Ricky nodded. "You got it."

There was a loud murmur this time.

"There are four. Two here, between the two storage buildings, and two way over here, all the way across the complex, between the other two storage buildings. And this, right here, on one side of each court, is a playground with equipment for older kids all the way up to adult size. On the other side, right here, is a small skate park."

"Wow," another kid said. "This is awesome cool. So where's the pool?"

The crowd chuckled.

Ricky nodded. "We thought about that actually, and we may still do it down the road. First we have to see how the tenants will take care of their own property. It's

gonna be up to you, actually, the older children, like from eight and up, to make sure that you take care of your home and surroundings. Most of the parents are busy working jobs or taking care of little ones. You're the ones who will know what's really going on in your neighborhood, in your own community. Well, you and security. Let's help everyone to take pride in their surroundings and keep it clean. If we see that happening, we might be able to feel comfortable with putting in a pool area. Fair enough?"

They all nodded.

"Now," Ricky went on. "Speaking of jobs. There are some employment opportunities available in this endeavor. We're gonna need two maintenance men willing to work hard. We're gonna need a new apartment manager, male or female full time and one part time. And we're gonna need a lawn maintenance crew. We can hire someone to come in, no problem, but if there are some of you who are searching for employment, we'd like to make it available to you first. There is no degree required. We can train you. So, call the number on the packet we've given you and talk to my guy, and he'll get the application process started."

"Now," Bree broke in. "Here's the big question. What are the logistics? How are we gonna get all of this stuff done?"

Ricky nodded. "First, we want you to know that we're gonna do it quickly. We intend to be completely done in four months. Some things will happen fast. Security gate, fencing, storage buildings. We also want to start on Building A in two weeks."

"So, while you're working on our building, where will we go?" Etta asked.

Ricky nodded. "Awesome question." He turned to his wife. "Bree?"

"Well, first, Miss Etta, someone will help you get all of your furniture and belongings moved into storage and then you will stay at the *Golden Hotel Home Suites* over on North Orange Drive."

Another murmur from the crowd.

Bree smiled. "There are kitchenettes in each room, and we will help you with whatever you need while you're there. And I realize that you may not know what you'll need until you get there so we have a person assigned to take calls and help you with anything you need. We're giving ourselves only one month for the renovation of each building. The other things, the storage buildings, the repaving and painting of the parking lot, the lighting, the play areas, and finally the landscaping, will also happen during those times."

Ricky stepped in. "Once we finish building A, we'll get you all moved back in and we'll have the tenants in building B ready to move out of their building immediately. We might overlap it a bit. We have to see how things will go. We have a tentative schedule from the contractors. And again, there are employment opportunities for anyone wanting to make a little extra cash on the side, like, some men or teen boys with strong backs helping to move people and other things that we might need as they unfold."

He looked at Bree and she nodded and smiled at the group. "So, that's about it. If, for some reason, you'd rather not be a part of creating this lovely community, we completely understand."

Ricky spoke again. “You may end your lease with no penalties anytime you wish within the next six months. Well, up until June first. After that time frame, you will be under a lease contract. Does anyone have any questions?”

“Will the name of the apartments change?” Tori Burton asked.

Bree answered. “We discussed that, and we came up with a compromise. We think *Village Garden* is actually a pretty name. But instead of *Village Garden Apartments*, we would like to change it slightly to *The Village Garden Apartment Homes*. Just a minor change, but really sometimes a minor tweaking makes all the difference. The name is a small change, but the community itself, will change to match its name. A beautiful garden and a lovely place to call ‘home’.”

Ricky smiled at his wife. Taylor smiled at her mom.

“Let me go ahead and end the meeting and if anyone wants to ask questions, Bree and I will stick around and answer for the next thirty minutes, but then, we have to get the kids home and in bed,” he said, smiling at Amari and Brittney.

As they entertained more questions, Taylor made her way upstairs to check in on choir practice, mostly because she wanted to make sure that Mika was escorted home. She arrived upstairs to hear a beautiful sound. Immediately she pulled out her phone and video called Gabe.

He answered and smiled into the camera. “Hey Tay!”

“Hi Gabe! I see you were in bed. Sorry. I just called cuz I thought you might want to hear what I’m hearing.”

‘What am I hearing, cuz it does sound good.”

She flipped the phone. “It’s choir practice.”

Gabe listened for a few minutes until the song they were working on ended. Logan was talking to them about crescendo and why it’s important for them to watch him. Taylor turned the phone back. “Whaddya think?”

Gabe shook his head. “I think I wish I could be part of that choir. They are really good and with my brother Logan working his magic, it’s pretty amazing.”

“Maybe you can join when you get out here?”

He frowned. “Maybe. But I think my time is gonna be pretty limited. Training. School. Studying.”

Taylor sighed.

“But I’ll find time to see you, babe. I miss you.”

“I miss you too. Just thirty-nine more hours until you arrive!”

Gabe chuckled. “Yep. I’m counting the days and you’re counting the hours.”

Taylor sighed. “And you have to report first thing Monday morning, right?”

“Yes. But I have to check into my room before 9:00 PM Sunday evening.”

She frowned. “That doesn’t give us much time.”

“I know. We gotta tough this out, babe.”

She nodded. “I will. Don’t worry about me. Just concentrate on doing all the stuff you have to do. At least you’ll be close, only a short distance away and not like Jake over in Afghanistan.”

Gabe smiled. “That’s right. And thank you for that. It helps me to feel stronger

when I don't have to worry that you're sad or miserable or worried or missing me."

She nodded. "Well, it's kinda easy to slip into that, because I do miss you. But I had a long talk with my parents and with Uncle Jason, and they told me it doesn't help you at all to not support you in what you're doing. And I told them I absolutely *do* support you. And they told me that when I complain about missing you and about you not having time to spend with me, then I'm putting pressure on you and that doesn't help you to succeed. They also said it was lack of maturity. They said to support you, I have to be strong too, so don't worry. I am gonna be strong. I have so much to do and so much to learn."

"Cool. Tell me some of the things you have to do."

"Well, I'm helping Jordan to plan her wedding and I'm gonna go to all of her softball games. Her season starts next month. AND, my school's baseball season starts in March and I want to see those games, cuz, you know, someone got me all interested in baseball."

Gabe smiled.

"And I'm working really hard at dance for my first recital, which will be in May. Oh, and also, Miss Jewell and Mom have teamed up and they are gonna give me and Jordan some cooking classes and some menu planning classes and even teach us about kitchen design."

"Oh wow," Gabe exclaimed. "That's very cool! Uh, so, that reminds me, my mom wanted me to ask you to how your mom is doing and when is the baby due."

"Mom is doing okay. She's had some bad days where she's dizzy and where the morning sickness lasts all day long. And then she's had some good days where she thinks she's over that part. Because she's older, the doctors are wanting to monitor her closely, but Jeffy says she's fine and the baby is fine and she's due at the end of August."

Gabe smiled. "Wow, so, your birthday and your mom's birthday are both at the end of August too."

"Right. So, August is gonna be a great month. And by the way, Gabe, tell your mom that she is welcome to call my mom anytime."

"I did tell her that already, but she says she doesn't want to bother her."

"That's silly. My mom considers your mom as part of our family and she's probably wondering why she hasn't bothered to call her. Remember, my mother's daughter is gonna have the same last name as your mom one day. We actually really ARE family."

Gabe smiled. "Yeah we are."

"So, excuse me young lady in the back of the chapel."

Taylor looked up from her phone call. "Oh, Logan, I am so sorry, was I talking too loud?"

Logan smiled and nodded. "Yes, and well, Gabe's voice carries."

Taylor turned the phone around.

"Hey, bro," Gabe said loudly. "Sorry, we didn't mean to disturb you, but hey, you guys sound awesome."

"Thanks Gabe. Everyone here is looking forward to meeting you so we hope you can come out one Sunday."

"I'm gonna have Sunday's off, so, yes sir, I'll be there. But just to hold me over, can y'all do a song for me and then I promise Taylor and I will hang up and won't bother your practice anymore."

"I think we can do that just for you, little bro." He nodded at the group. "Let's do Chris Tomlin's song, Holy Forever." He turned to the piano, nodded at guitar man Sal, and the drummer Zeke, and started in.

Gabe watched and listened intently. His heart swelled almost immediately as the Holy Spirit filled him as it so often did. Logan's gorgeous voice began the song, but the choir came in quickly.

Mika had a solo at the start of the second verse. Taylor smiled as Mrs. Burton came into the chapel just in time. She stood in the back and listened. Mika was doing great and Taylor could tell that the words meant a lot to Mika. "If you've been forgiven, and if you've been redeemed, sing a song forever to the lamb." *Please Jesus, Taylor thought. Please protect Mika from Teo and T.*

✝✝✝

January 9th 8:45 PM Thursday Evening

The Village Garden Apartment Homes, Huntington Beach, California

Tori Burton linked her arm with her daughter, Tamika Burton as they walked slowly together down the drive from the street to their apartment.

Tori smiled. This was nice, walking with her daughter. It was like their lives were changing so quickly for the better. She was so proud of Mika. She'd gone upstairs to hear the end of choir practice and her daughter had a solo and she was amazing. Then, that young man, Logan Adams, who Mika thought hung the moon, prayed over the choir and dismissed them.

Miss Taylor Kino was adamant that either Logan or her own father walk Tori and her daughter home, but Tori let them know that Matteo had never been anything but respectful to her and that he would never cause trouble with Mika while she was with her.

Then Agent Thomas had shown up, apologized for being late, and told Mika he had a gift for her. She opened a small white box to find a necklace with a single, round, gold, charm. Engraved on the charm was a cross, and in the middle of the cross was a blue stone. They were told the stone was actually a tiny camera. It wasn't always activated, but if she pressed the small prong on the back of the pendant, the camera would turn on. He had her put it on and turn it on before they headed down the drive back to their home and told them he'd be monitoring as they walked, just to test it out.

When they were halfway down the drive, Mika peeked over to the graffiti-covered wall Teo liked to sit on, but it was empty. She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Do you have any homework?" Tori asked her daughter.

"A little bit. I promise to get it done fast. So, Mom, whaddya think 'bout this renovation thing?"

Tori smiled. "Well, it sounds like it's gonna be real nice. I hope the other tenants

will keep things up."

Mika nodded. "Me too. I know the Garcias will help with that. Whaddya think about the security gate and all the cameras?"

"I like feeling like someone I trust is watching over things. If it was another company, I wouldn't trust it. But the Kinos endorse Ameritech and I trust the Kinos. What do you think about it?"

Mika smiled, because her mother usually never asked her what she thought. "I think it's cool and Taylor said her uncle will actually own Ameritech one day, and he already helps run it, so like, it's kind of a Kino family company, ya know?"

Tori smiled. "I think things are really turning around for us, baby."

"Mom, I was thinking, ya know, it's just you and me and I'm almost grown now. You been workin' two jobs as long as I can remember."

"Yeah, so?"

"So, Taylor told me that there was gonna be some job openings available. Did they talk about that at your meeting?"

"Yes they did."

"Well, I was thinkin' Mom, why don't you apply to be the new manager or maybe at least the part-time manager."

Tori's eyes opened wide with surprise. "I don't think I'm qualified. I've never had anything to do with apartment management. The only thing I've managed is the breakfast crew at McDonald's."

"Yeah, but you been working all kinds of jobs since before I was born, right? Think of all the experience you have. You work hard and you handle customers at the convenience store. You managed the breakfast shift at McDonald's. You worked at that daycare center when I was little. You were a sales clerk at the shoe store in the mall. You were the crew manager for the hotel housekeeping crew over at *Golden Hotels* downtown. You worked at the school in the lunchroom. You've done so much."

"Yes, but I don't know how to manage apartments."

"But you could learn. Mr. Kino said they would train you. I mean, if you're not sure 'bout it, you could just go for the part-time job, and maybe move up later. Come on, Mom. It would be nice to have you nearby for a change. You been workin' so hard all your life. I mean, since I was born anyway. You had me when you were sixteen. You only thirty-two now. Mom, you're young. But you won't stay young long if you keep working yourself to death."

Tori laughed. "Wow, Mika, I didn't know you were thinking like this. Usually you won't even talk to me in full sentences."

Mika frowned. "I know, Mom. But something's changed in me. I know it sounds crazy, but I feel different inside. This Christmas with you, my mom, it was pretty special for some reason. And like, Mr. Logan, in practice today, he was talkin' 'bout his own mom, and that before she met Mr. Adams, life was real hard. And he like, tried so hard to take care of her. He said, loving your mother and honoring your mother, it will make you happy. And I thought, I don't ever tell you how much I love you."

Tori stopped walking, her eyes opening wide.

Mika looked at her. “Mom, don’t cry.” She reached out and hugged her.

When they pulled away she sighed. “Mr. Logan was right. Honoring you, it does make me happy. Mom, I think Jesus is talking to me in my heart and I think things for us are gonna change big time.”

Tori smiled and brushed some hair back from her beautiful daughter’s face. “I am so proud of you, my girl.”

They continued on and turned the corner to Building B and stopped short. Teo was in the parking lot, parked next to Tori’s car in front of their door. He was leaning on the fender of his car.

When he saw them he stood up straight. “Where ya been, Meeks? I didn’t see you on the bus today.” He glanced at Tori. “Oh, hey Miz Burton.”

“Hello, Matteo.”

“So, can Mika come for a ride with me?”

Mika’s heart beat fast, but her mother smiled smoothly. “Well, Matteo, Mika told me that you and her broke up.”

He smiled a charming smile. “Yeah, but I just wanna work things out.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Teo, but she doesn’t want to go for a ride with you, and even if she did, I wouldn’t allow it because it’s late and she has homework.”

“You gotta be kidding me.”

Tori’s eyes narrowed. “No, I’m not kidding. Now, she says you two are no longer boyfriend and girlfriend, and I’ll have to stand by her on that.”

He reached out and grabbed Mika’s wrist. “Well we won’t be long. I just wanna have one small private conversation.”

“Let go of me,” Mika ordered.

Tori moved forward and grabbed his forearm and tried to make him let go of her daughter. “Let go, Teo. I mean it. I cannot believe you’re behaving this way.”

Matteo pulled Tori’s arm from his and shoved her. She stumbled and fell backward onto the sidewalk. Mika yelled and swung her free hand at Teo’s face, but he ducked. And then, a strong hand pulled Matteo’s hand from Mika’s wrist.

Agent Thomas nodded at Mika. “Mika, help your mom up and go inside and lock the door.”

Teo pulled back and tried to swing at Thomas. He caught his fist, turned him around, twisted his arm behind his back and held him fast.

“You breakin’ my arm,” Teo screamed.

“Oh, stop being a baby. You’re okay.”

Matteo jumped and struggled and tried to get away, so Agent Thomas threw him down and cuffed him.

“So you *are* a cop,” he laughed. “You better check with your SO, man. They won’t arrest me.”

“Oh, yeah, kid? I think you’re wrong. Which one you talkin’ ‘bout?”

“Sergeant Milsap. You might better give him a call right now. He gonna be pretty mad you messed with me. I work for T-bone.”

“Oh, for T-bone? Man, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that.”

"Yeah, you gonna be sorry."

"Maybe I should go over Milsap's head to the Lieutenant."

Teo laughed again. "That's funny. How new are you, man? And if you try to go over Aranda's head to the captain, Lieutenant Aranda will have somebody take you out in a second."

"You're trying to tell me that Lieutenant Aranda would have me killed? "Oh, come on, kid, I don't believe you."

"Well, you should. He's done it before."

"Sure kid."

"Wait and see."

"Tell me just one person he killed and I might let you go."

"You stupid man. How 'bout Officer Durant. You thought he really got killed in a drive by? He was targeted man. And you arrest me, you gonna go down too. Now, be a good little boy and unlock these cuffs.

"How do you know that? Did you shoot him?"

"Naw, man, but I know cuz well, someone had to drive."

Thomas rolled his eyes. "What else you wanna tell me?"

Teo drew in a breath. He suddenly realized what he was doing. Spilling his guts. But it wouldn't matter, cuz this guy is gonna be dead soon. "I ain't tellin' you nothin' else 'cept, you a dead man."

"You get all that, Chief Davis?"

"I got it all. Detain the young man, Agent Thomas. Jason will have to reach out to the Huntington Chief of Police and we'll help them figure out what to do with the young man and how to get rid of their crooked cops."

"Yes sir," Agent Thomas said.

"So, I have backup coming your way in five, and good cops will be there soon to take your guy into custody."

"Roger that."

"What did he say?" Teo demanded.

"None of your business, little man."

"Who Chief Davis?"

"He's my boss."

"Never heard of him."

"You'll know all about him soon. Now sit here and shut up. Some nice Huntington Police officers will be here soon to pick you up."

"You are so stupid, man. You goin' down so hard."

Agent Thomas sighed. He was trying to think of how Ameritech is gonna go about taking down dirty cops, take down T-Bone, and save this stupid kid's life.

✝✝✝

1 John 3:4

"Everyone who makes a practice of sinning
also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness."

Chapter Three

"Mika get away from the window."

"I'm videoing, Mom."

Tori sighed. "What's happening?"

"Teo tried to fight Agent Thomas and he laid him out and put him in cuffs."

"Really? They carry cuffs too?"

"Yeah, they're like a private version of police, and Taylor says they work with the cops all the time. But they're not cops. They're like, special forces. Like, good at everything, and Taylor says you'll never see an out of shape or overweight Ameritech Agent. They have super high standards."

Tori nodded, then sighed. "I don't understand that boy. He's always been so respectful and nice."

Mika sighed. "No, Mom, he just put on a show for you. He's not nice and that's why I finally broke up with him. He's gettin' mean, especially ever since he got in with T-Bone."

Tori rubbed her hands over her arms to stop the chill. "I didn't know he got in with that piece of trash."

Mika glanced at her mother. She was a pretty lady. She was young for a mom. She had a pretty face. She was slim and always dressed modestly. Her hair was natural curly, short, only to her ears, and had a slight red tint. She was cute. Attractive. T-Bone thought her mother was hot, and tried to get her to go out with him, but her mom knew the kinda man he was and wouldn't give him the time of day and told him so. That was when he smacked her. Mika sighed as she remembered her mother going to work the next day and having to explain the bruise on her face.

T-Bone didn't go away though. He was seein' Ms. Meeks, and lately, Ms. Peevey. He didn't have an apartment in the complex, but he hung out here enough, even after Mr. Kino took him down. Mika smiled at the thought. It had been so awesome to see Mr. Kino easily and quickly kick T-Bone's butt, cuz T-Bone was a large man and a mean man who thought he ruled everyone. Really, life here in the *Village Apartments* had become pretty tense. Everyone walking on eggshells, trying to avoid certain people, but Mika had a feeling that now, things are gonna get cleaned up, and it will be safe to take your kids to the playground, or walk down the street.

Her attention was drawn back to what was happening outside. "The police are here," Mika said. "And more agents too."

"Are they arresting, Teo?"

"I think so."

"Well, now I'm feelin' kind of bad for him. I mean, he's just a kid who's made mistakes."

Mika turned. “No, Mom, he’s not. He’s a criminal.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s dealin’ and he’s beat people up really bad, and he...”

“What?”

“Nothin’, Mom.”

“I had no idea Teo was like this. If you knew those things about him, why did you go with him?”

Mika sniffed as tears welled in her eyes. She turned her complete attention to her mother and went to sit next to her. “It was a stupid reason, Mom. I mean, Teo, he’s got clout.”

“Clout?”

“Yeah, you know, he’s like, real popular in school. More than popular really, more like, he’s got power. It’s like he runs the place. He’s so nice to look at and everyone wanted him. His light skin, his blond curls. To be his girlfriend, was like, instant fame. Suddenly everyone wanted to be my friend. But Mom, it wasn’t a good feelin’. It was like, empty I guess. No one liked me because I’m nice, or funny, or because I sing good. They liked me cuz I have power because of Teo. And Teo told me more than once that he liked me because I’m hot. Ya know? And he can’t have no ugly girl hangin’ on his arm.”

“I’m sorry baby. I’m sorry I’ve been away at work and you been goin’ through all that. I haven’t been here for you.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay. I know you’re tryin’ to pay the bills.”

Tori put her arms around her daughter and hugged her. “So, Mika, did Teo ever try anything with you?”

Mika swallowed hard. She didn’t want her mother to know what she’d done. She’d told Taylor, but she hadn’t even told Taylor everything. She was so ashamed. But finding Jesus has made her realize that it doesn’t matter what she’s done, she can repent and be forgiven.

“Mika?”

“I, um, I don’t wanna talk about this right now.”

“Did he try stuff with you, Mika?” Tori said again, her voice rising.

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Tori jumped up and went to answer it. She looked out the peep hole and opened the door.

Agent Thomas smiled at her. He had two police officers with him.

“Hello again, Ms. Burton,” Agent Thomas said kindly.

She nodded. “Agent Thomas, um, would you like to come in?”

He nodded and the three men stepped inside the apartment. Mika rose and stood there nervously.

“Ms. Burton, were you hurt?” Thomas asked.

She shook her head. “No, not really. I just scraped my arm a little bit on the sidewalk, but I’m okay.”

“Good. Well, these two officers are from the Huntington Beach Police Department have some questions for you and Tamika.”

She nodded. “Okay. Well um, would you like to sit down?” she asked as she pointed to the sofa.”

“No ma’am, that’s okay, we’ll stand,” one of the officers said and then turned to Mika. “You’re Tamika Burton?”

“Yes.”

“And Matteo Peevey is your boyfriend?”

“He was, but I broke up with him, but he wouldn’t stop.”

“He wouldn’t stop what?”

She glanced nervously at her mother. “He wouldn’t leave me alone. He kept sayin’ it’s not over.”

The officer nodded. “And what happened out there tonight?”

“He was waitin’ for me. We came around the building and up the sidewalk and he was leanin’ against his car in the parking lot out front there, that Camaro, that’s his car, and he came to me and told me he wanted me to take a drive with him. I told him no, and he said it would only be a quick drive and grabbed me and wouldn’t let me go and my mom tried to make him let go and he pushed her down and that’s when Agent Thomas came up and helped us.”

The officer nodded. “Have you ever been in his car?”

“Sure. Lots of times.”

“That’s a nice car.”

She only nodded.

“Do you know how he got it?”

“He bought it with cash money. I know cuz he bragged about it enough.”

“Does he have a job?”

“Not a real one.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s dealin’ for T-Bone.”

“How do you know that?”

She shrugged. “I mean like, everyone knows it. He’s the go-to guy for whatever you want.”

The officers were very aware of that, but they wanted as much information as possible to put together a solid case. This time, T-bone is goin’ away, along with several others, including Sergeant Curtis Milsap and Lieutenant Jorge Aranda, two officers who are worse than the street criminals. They are why people don’t trust cops.

“Tamika, have you ever seen Teo sell drugs?” the officer asked.

The girl worriedly glanced at her mother. “Yeah.”

“More than once?”

“Yes. Too many times to count.”

“Does he sell to kids or adults?”

“Both.”

“Have you ever used any of the drugs?”

“No! No sir, I swear. I don’t do that. I never liked what he was doin’ and I finally

got the nerve to break up with him."

The officer nodded. "Did you ever see him hurt anyone?"

She nodded. "Lots of times. He beat people up lots of times, if like, they didn't give him the money they were supposed to bring."

"Tamika," the other officer said. "Did he ever hurt you?"

She swallowed and glanced at her mom. She felt her eyes start to moisten and she sniffed. "Um, well...."

They waited.

"I mean, he never hit me."

"What *did* he do to you?"

She couldn't stop the tears from filling her eyes. She looked at her mom and then at Agent Thomas. "Can I talk to Agent Thomas a minute, like, alone?"

Knowing that Ameritech was trusted and working with them, the police officers nodded. "Go ahead. We'll wait."

"Okay then, let's step into the kitchen," Agent Thomas offered.

In the kitchen, Mika and Agent Thomas stood closely together so she could speak quietly. "Mika," he said softly. "I know what he did to you. Taylor told her brother last night because he wanted to know why you needed protecting, and then Eric told me, for the same reason."

"What am I gonna do?" she asked as she cried softly, the tears now running over her cheeks. "I don't want my mom to find out."

He nodded. "I can understand that, but, Mika, your mom seems to me to be like a really good mom. She loves you, I know, or she wouldn't work so hard to take care of you. It would hurt her to know that you went through something so hard and you felt like you couldn't turn to her."

"It's not that. It's that, well, I mean, I guess I feel ashamed."

"He assaulted you, Mika and it's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong and you have nothing to be ashamed about."

Mika shook her head. "No, he did what he did because he was use to gettin' what he wanted from me. So, it was my fault too."

"Okay, I understand where you're coming from. I do. And you're right in some ways, if you'd never given yourself to him, then he wouldn't expect it. However, did you tell him no?"

She sniffed and nodded. "I told him no more. I told him I wanted to change my ways and be good and go to church. He told me if he couldn't have me like he wanted, then I couldn't have him as my boyfriend and I still wanted him for a boyfriend, just not sex, so, I didn't know what to say. He asked if he could come to the house and just chill, and then he started kissing me and then he tried to do more and I told him no, but he held me down and forced me. See, it's not really like he raped me."

Agent Thomas frowned. "It's exactly like he raped you."

"But it was my fault. I shouldn't have let him come to the house."

"Inviting someone into your home to hang out is not a sin. You assumed he would respect your decision. But Mika, I guarantee you that he intended to get just what he

wanted when he asked to come 'chill' with you."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm a man. Trust me. He had every intention of taking you when he got here to your apartment."

She nodded. "Okay, if you say so. But Agent Thomas, I don't want my mom to know that I been, like, sexually active."

"What better person to know than the one who loves you unconditionally?"

She sighed and chewed on her lip.

"Mika, you just said that you wanted to change and be good and go to church. Sounds like you found Jesus."

She nodded. "I feel Him so strong," she whispered reverently.

"Well, He would want you to be honest with your mother. He want you to be brave and accept the consequences of your actions. It really is the only good way to get out of this situation."

She closed her eyes, making more tears run down her cheeks. He reached over and grabbed a paper towel off the roll and handed it to her. "Come on now, are you ready to face the music?"

She wiped her face and nodded. "I can do this."

"After you," he said, gesturing her forward. "I'll be right there with you the whole way."

✞✞✞

January 10th 6:30 AM Friday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Nolan Sawyer pulled up in his charcoal gray Dodge Ram pickup. Grabbing the box of supplies, he hurried to the front door. Gabe stood there. He smiled and waved. "Mornin', Noles. Need any help?"

"Nope. Got everything I need right here."

Gabe held the door for him. They both headed into the kitchen.

Nolan carefully placed the box on the white countertop and turned to his soon-to-be father-in-law, who was busy pouring himself a cup of coffee. "Good morning, sir."

Keegan smiled. "Yes it is. Do you have everything you need?"

He nodded. "I think I do."

"Need any help?"

He shook his head. "No, but thanks for offering. If you help then I can't say, 'I cooked you breakfast' to Heather, know what I mean?"

"I do indeed," Keegan said.

Nolan washed his hands. "But, I see you did preheat the oven for me and you laid out this big pan, so thanks for that." He opened a package of bacon and started laying thick cut slices out on the pan.

"Oh wow," Gabe said. "I love that thick kind of bacon."

Nolan smiled. "I'm making enough for everyone."

"What else are you making?" Gabe asked.

"Well, Heather's favorite breakfast is banana, raisin and brown sugar oatmeal with

a side of bacon, and strawberries and blueberries with whipped cream."

Gabe frowned. "I'm pretty sure her absolute favorite is scrambled cheese eggs and raisin toast."

Nolan frowned. "Really?"

"Absolutely," Gabe assured him.

"Oh, well, um, Mr. Tanner, may I borrow some eggs?"

"You may, but, I gotta tell ya, Nolan, Gabe's just messin' with you. I know because that's what he just told me he wanted for breakfast and he's trying to get you to make it for him."

Nolan frowned and looked at Gabe with fresh eyes.

Gabe grinned. "Thanks a lot, Dad."

"You're welcome. Make your own breakfast. You need practice."

Gabe nodded. "You're right." He looked at Nolan. "I wasn't gonna let you go all the way with it anyway."

Nolan smiled. "That's good to know."

"Yeah, I don't lie, but I do joke around."

Keegan sat and chatted with Nolan while the younger man worked on starting a pot of oatmeal.

"So, now that you've been staying at your new home, what have you decided is the first thing you need to do?" Keegan asked.

"Well, I've already hired a plumber to install new toilets and bathroom sinks and a shower head. Heather found a kitchen design she likes and we've found a contractor to install the new kitchen but that won't happen for a few weeks. I personally have been retesting the water and soil samples on the property and started demolishing the old barn, because it's a hazard."

Keegan nodded. "You know, I built this house."

"Yes sir, I know."

"So, what I'm trying to say is, I can help you, if you'd like."

"I thought about that, but I know how busy you are and didn't want to burden you with it."

"Burden me? Wow. Well, you're marrying my daughter. That makes you my son-in-law, and I would be more than happy to help you and to even teach you how to rebuild that home, or parts of that home, if you want to learn. If you'd rather not learn, that's okay too. It's not for everyone. Either way, Nolan, we're family now, and you can ask me anything. Come to me with anything, any problem, and I'll help you figure it out."

Gabe smiled.

Nolan nodded. "Mr. Tanner, thank you. Really. I guess I'm used to trying to handle things on my own because my father has been pretty much inaccessible my whole life. I was told to figure things out on my own and that would make me a man. So I tried. The problem was, when I did that, he told me I was all wrong."

Keegan nodded. "Are we talking about how he runs the ranch?"

"Yes sir. Well, that's one of the big things. The cattlemen's association up there,

they all were really attentive to Heather and the things she was teaching. There are ways to do things that are humane, and she was very convincing in what she was teaching. The men, at first, weren't interested. But Heather was persistent. She didn't come across as manish, or like she thought she was as big and strong as the men who run those ranches up there. She was just the opposite. And with her steady but gentle ways, she won almost all of those men over."

Keegan smiled. "I'm glad to know she held on to her feminine side."

Nolan smiled. "Well, that side of her, along with the fact that she's gorgeous, was what actually kept their interest. At first, I think she was just eye candy, but one by one, she won their respect, all but my father and one or two others. And being a veterinarian, of course, I love animals. I get that God put them here to be used by humankind. But there is a way, an honorable way, to do things. Heather understood that. She knew that. And her love and her heart was into everything she did and said, and that was what she tried to teach and I fell for her so hard. She's the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm just grateful that she came up there. I'm so grateful that she's in my life."

"Well, she's a good girl, Nolan. I'm depending on you to take care of her and be respectful of her, and allow her to be your partner in all things."

Nolan smiled. "You don't have to worry, Mr. Tanner. I will be all of those things. She is my partner, and I have so much respect for her, so, I will try very hard to emulate you. I watch you very closely, what you do, how you speak to your family, how you handle things, because Heather has told me that she wants what you and Mrs. Tanner have."

Keegan's lips pressed together to keep his emotions in check. "Well, if you emulate my marriage, then I know my daughter will be very happy, because my wife and I are very happy. But, Nolan, how we do that is by placing God first in every single thing we do."

"Yes sir, I see that. I see that if God is first, and we're trying to emulate His holy ways, then even if we make mistakes, we can always get back to love."

"Good. Yes. And pray together, day and night," Keegan reminded him.

"We already do, I mean, over the phone. And we will when we're living together. We won't stop. I promise you."

Gabe sat quietly listening to the conversation, his heart swelling with the love and respect he felt for his father and comforted that his sister found such a worthy man to marry.

The three looked up at footsteps on the stairs. Daisy and Lily smiled as they came into the kitchen. "Good morning guys!"

"Mornin' ladies," Keegan answered.

"Aww, you're cooking Heather breakfast in bed?"

Nolan smiled. "Yep, and I'm almost done. There's bacon and oatmeal for anyone that wants it."

"Oooh, thank you," Lily said.

"What are your plans today girls?" Keegan asked.

Lily smiled. "Daisy and Brody and I are gonna go to my place on Main Street and

start getting some ideas on what we want to do. I'm thinking I might wanna get a good start on things before the Inn starts filling up again for spring at the end of March."

"Okay, well, I have to work today, so make sure your mom has the help she needs," Keegan reminded.

"Violet and I have that covered," Gabe said quickly. "Rose has to be at the Center until two, and then she's gonna pick up Heather's cake and we'll all meet at the Inn for her party at five."

Keegan nodded. "Okay. Sounds like you all have it covered. I'll trust you to take care of things, Gabe."

"I will. It's my last night here. I'll give it my all."

They all got quiet a minute.

Gabe looked around. "Y'all know I can't stay here forever."

"We know," Lily said softly. "We just don't like to think about it."

Nolan smiled as he finished placing everything neatly on a tray. He knew the entire Tanner family was having a hard time realizing that their little brother was growing up and leaving the nest. He couldn't blame them. He too missed Gabe when he wasn't around.

Nolan stood back and looked over the tray. Finally, he pulled a rectangular shaped box from the larger box he'd carried in and placed it on the tray. The box was wrapped in lavender colored paper and tied with a white bow.

"Looks good, Noles," Gabe said with a nod. "I approve."

Nolan nodded. "Good to know." He sighed. "Okay, well if I don't see you all again before this evening, have a good day."

"You too," they all said.

Nolan picked up the tray and headed upstairs. Rose and Violet came out of their room just as he got upstairs. He nodded and smiled and said, "Shhhh," before they could make a big deal about the tray of breakfast. They giggled, and kissed his cheek.

"Good morning," Rose whispered. "So, how do you intend to video this little event with your hands full?"

He frowned. "Oh. Well, I didn't think about that."

"What if I video for you, just for the first part? Then you'll have it captured, and I'll leave you to your privacy."

He nodded. "Good idea. Thanks, Rose."

"Well, if she gets to see then I'm hanging around too," Violet said.

Rose smiled and Nolan nodded.

"I'll open the door," Violet whispered.

She knocked softly.

"Come in," Heather said.

Violet opened the door and stepped aside and Nolan stepped through with the tray.

Heather smiled sweetly from where she sat on the side of the bed. She quickly scooted back up to sit with her back against the headboard. "Oh my goodness, Nolan, breakfast in bed! You are too much!"

Nolan smiled. "Happy birthday, Heather. The first one together as a couple. The

first of about eighty more."

She smiled. "Well, I don't know about that because Jesus will probably come before all of that."

He laughed. "Hopefully. Whichever way it goes down, we'll be together for always. I love you, baby. Happy twenty-fifth birthday."

"Oh, this is just so awesome. And look, my favorite breakfast of all time! Did you cook this all by yourself?"

He chuckled. "Yes, as a matter of fact I did."

Heather smiled up at her sisters. "Hey Rose, Hey Violet!"

Rose frowned and shook her head. "Pretend like we're not here, Heather. We're just gettin' a little video."

"Oh, how silly of me. I can't believe I broke the third wall."

"I can't either," Rose said sternly.

"Well, while that third wall is here, let me do this." Nolan leaned over, cupped Heather's face in his palms and kissed her. The kiss was very long and very slow and when they ended it, they looked up to find themselves alone. Nolan smiled and he sat down on the bed. "Let's bless the food and you can eat before it gets cold."

He took her hands and blessed the food and the day and her. He then chatted with her as she enjoyed her breakfast.

She complimented his cooking skills. He watched her eat and fell more in love with her then he already was and it made him wish very much that they were already married.

"I had a talk with your father this morning. He's such a good guy."

Heather nodded. "He is amazing. I've always been so grateful for him. Once he came into our lives, everything changed. My mom was a widow with five children all alone. My father was dead. My grandparents were dead. But Daddy, he brought real security to our lives. He was so strong, and so kind and so protective of Mom. I asked him to be my daddy within only a few weeks of knowing him."

Nolan chuckled. "And did he agree at that time?"

"No. If I remember right, I think my mom fussed at me for saying that. I don't really remember it all, but, I think I knew before my mom knew, that this man was supposed to be our dad."

"Well, I'm grateful for him too, because he raised you to be the most amazing girl in the world. Thank goodness you came up to Tennessee for that job with the cattlemen's association."

Heather nodded. "Thank goodness. Thank God. It was meant to be. Oh, Nolan, I'm so happy."

"I'm glad 'cause I am too."

Heather picked up the box on the tray. "Is this for me?"

He nodded. "Of course."

"May I open it now?"

"Of course."

She carefully removed the bow and unwrapped the box and opened it.

Her eyes opened wide. It was a shiny gold charm bracelet. “Oh, Nolan, this is beautiful.”

He smiled. “So, it only has two charms on it so far. That heart one is for the day you said ‘yes.’ And this one is for your twenty-fifth birthday.”

“Why does it say ‘one’?”

“It’s the first birthday of yours that we’ve celebrated together. By the time we get to twenty-five, you’ll be fifty.”

“Oh goodness, don’t wanna think about that.”

He laughed. “Why not. It will mean twenty-five years of pure happiness.” He took her hand. “Anyway, babe, I’ll get you a charm for every milestone we pass. One for our wedding day. One for each anniversary and each birthday. One for the births of each of our children. And so on.”

She smiled. “The births of our children. That sounds so awesome.”

✞✞✞

January 10th Lunch Time, Friday Afternoon

Pine Forest Middle School, Pine Forest, Georgia

Matt Stewart set his lunch bag down on the table and as usual, placed each item neatly in front of him, including his thermal cup filled with ice cold raw milk. His friends filed in around him and as usual made fun of the elaborate lunch. Today it was a giant sandwich. The large pieces of bread were an organic brand made with twenty-one whole grains and seeds. Between those pieces of bread were slices of roast beef, with lettuce and tomato. Also included in the lunch were carrot sticks, a banana, quinoa chips, and six giant chocolate chip oatmeal cookies.

Matt’s friends all waited for him to silently bless his food and then hand out cookies to his friends.

“Thanks, Matt,” Paul said.

“Yea, thanks,” a few more guys said.

Paul nodded. “Your mom makes great cookies.”

“Well, those were made by Laynah and Aralyn.”

“That Laynah, she’s hot,” Paul said.

“Whatever,” Matt said with a laugh. “You think every girl is hot.”

“Yeah, well, not everyone. But hey, that new girl, you’re friend, Hannah? She looks good.”

Matt nodded. “She’s a nice girl.”

Kramer, another boy at the table nodded. “So, did she really get kidnapped and held hostage by some deranged guy?”

Matt sighed. “She didn’t get kidnapped. She was with her mom, and the guy was like, her mom’s boyfriend. They were living with him. But then he killed her mom, and that’s when he started keeping Hannah chained up.”

“That sucks man.”

“Yeah, she’s had a hard time.”

“So, did you hear what Axle did to her?” Kramer asked.

Matt looked up, concern on his face. “What did he do?”

"He locked her in the classroom today. The class was leaving to go to the library I think it was, and she was the last one and he closed the door and wouldn't let her out."

Matt's heart was beating so hard he felt like he was gonna throw up. "How did he lock the door?"

"Well, he didn't actually lock it," Paul jumped in. "He just held it closed and wouldn't let her open it."

"Did you see it?" Matt asked.

"No, or I would've helped her."

"From what I heard," Kramer went on. "He wouldn't let her out and she started cryin' and stuff and begged him to please open the door and he laughed at her and told her she should be used to being locked in a room. And then she stopped begging and just sat down beside the door where he couldn't see her and waited. He finally left and she finally made it to the library. That's all I know."

"Axle is a bully," Paul said. "Someone needs to take him out."

Matt nodded. He was thinking that someone was gonna be him. He didn't care that Axle was thirteen. Matt was big for his age. He was twelve, but he was about to be thirteen on the twentieth. Someone needs to stand up for Hannah. He was told he should look out for her and protect her as much as possible. Though he was in the seventh grade, and Hannah was in the eight grade, it made it hard for him to watch over her. He finished his lunch, and a few hours later, finally finished his day. Right before school got out, he asked to use the bathroom and was granted permission.

Matt grabbed his backpack and headed out, but he didn't go to the restroom. He headed to the eight grade hall. He waited for the bell to ring and when Axle came out of his classroom, Matt followed him out.

"Hey Axle," Matt called.

Axle and a few of his friends stopped and turned. "Hey little Stewart kid. How's it?"

"I wanna talk to you."

He came over to stand in front of Matt. "Okay. So talk."

Matt shook his head. "Not here. Let's go over to the side of the school. By the football field."

"Why?"

"Because when I punch you in the face I don't want any teachers to come running to help you out."

Axle's friends all laughed. Axle himself smiled, but wasn't as amused as everyone else.

"What's this all about, little Stewart?"

"Walk on over and meet me on the side and I'll tell you all about it," Matt said as he turned and started walking. When Axle didn't move, Matt turned back. "Or are you too afraid of me to come?"

Axle's eyes narrowed. "I ain't scared of no little Stewart kid."

Matt smiled and nodded as he walked backward. "And that would be your first mistake." He turned and headed toward the side of the school.

"Fight on the side of the school by the football field," was whispered over and over during the next five minutes.

Matt got to the place he wanted to be, dropped his pack, took off his coat and started swinging his arms back and forth. He waited and finally, Axle came around the corner with a whole bunch of other kids. Matt felt no fear. He was too mad to feel afraid. His anger burned hot and he had it in his mind that he was gonna demolish this kid.

The others gathered around as Axle took off his jacket and faced off against Matt. "So, what's this all about, Stewart?"

"It's about what you did to Hannah."

"Oh, that. You gotta be kiddin' me. I didn't do nothin' to her, I mean, not really. It was just a joke."

"It wasn't funny. She's had a hard time. You're nothin' but a bully, and I'm not lettin' you off. You ever do anything to her again, and I'll do more that just kick your butt. Today, you're gonna learn."

Axle's face reddened. He looked around at everyone watching. Some of his friends. Some other eight graders and some seventh graders. "Oh, come on, Stewart, you gotta admit, she's fun to play with. No wonder that guy kept her chained up."

Matt drew a sharp breath and moved blindingly fast. He spun and kicked Axle on the side of his head and he went down.

The crowd cheered and laughed, making lots of noise.

Axle got up. "You just messed up, kid."

Matt nodded. "Come on then."

Axle moved forward and tried to swing at Matt's face, but Matt merely dodged and punched twice, connecting both times with Axle's face. Axle stumbled back.

"What's goin' on here!"

Everyone stilled when they heard the loud voice of Coach Bell.

Kids scattered. Half truth explanations were called out and finally, Axle and Matt were escorted to the principle's office.

Meanwhile, Laynah waited with Hannah in the car for Matt to come out of school. When he never showed up, she got out and asked a teacher about him. A search commenced and it didn't take long to find out that Matt was being taken to the principle's office for fighting.

Laynah immediately took out her phone.

"Hey Bugs," Chaz answered on the third ring. "What's up?"

"You need to come to the school."

"Something about Hannah?"

"No, it's Matt. He's been fighting."

Chaz sighed. "On my way."

"Hannah and I will wait until you get here."

"Thanks."

✝✝✝

January 10th 4:30 PM EST Friday Late Afternoon

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

The Stewart family and the Appel Family sat in the Stewart's den for the discussion that ensued after they'd returned home from the middle school.

"So, son," Chaz went on. "I'm not gonna punish you because I know you were trying to do the right thing. The only thing I'm gonna ask you to do, is if there is another situation like this, talk to me first."

"But Dad, he's a bully. Someone needed to put him down."

"I actually agree with you," Chaz said. "And I'm proud of how you fought. Still, just talk to me first. At least give me a heads up."

Matt nodded. "Yes sir."

John Appel smiled. "I'm proud of how you fought as well."

"Me too," Charlie said. "Way to go, bro."

Matt smiled.

Jodi and John sat on the loveseat with Hannah squeezed in between them. Jodi looked down at the young girl. "I get a feeling, Hannah, that you want to say something?"

Hannah sighed. "I just wanna say that I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I'm sorry Matt got in trouble because of me."

"Okay. Let's nip that in the bud," John said. "Matt got in trouble because Matt chose to fight at school. It was his choice. He suffers the consequences."

Matt nodded. "That's right, Hannah. I knew what I was doin'."

"But still, it was because of me."

"No," Jodi said quickly. "It was because of what Axel chose to do to you. And he too suffered the consequences of what he did."

"Yeah, but he didn't get suspended for fighting," Hannah argued. "And Matt did. That doesn't seem fair."

"Well, Matt started it," Charlie reasoned.

Lisa sighed. "And at least Axle did get suspended for mistreating you, Hannah. So, it all worked out."

Jodi nodded. "And John, I'm thinking, if this kid's a bully, and he got suspended over what he did to Hannah, she might be in his crosshairs when he gets back."

John nodded in agreement. "I think I'll have another word with the principle. This bullying cannot be allowed."

Aralyn suddenly got up and went to Hannah. "I'm sorry that boy did that to you, Hannah. Please don't be sad."

Hannah smiled. "Oh, thank you, Aralyn. I'm not sad. Really. I'm just worried about Matt and I wish he didn't get in trouble. And I'm not afraid of Axle. I'm learning martial arts now too and maybe next time, I'll kick his butt."

Jodi and Lisa smiled.

Charlie answered his phone. "Hey, Gabe. Yes, the meeting is almost done. What? Really?"

Charlie looked up. "Hey guys, this is Gabe. Apparently a bunch of videos of the

fight are going viral because a lot of people put a title on their video that said something like, *Another fighter from Gabe Tanner's little town in Pine Forest, Georgia.* And another title says, *Gabe's neighbor kickin' butt*. And he says one says, *Appel Martial Arts does it again*."

John smiled. "Good publicity."

Charlie smiled. "And Gabe says to not forget about Heather's birthday."

"We would never forget our little Heather," Lisa said. "If we're done here, let's get a move on."

The men gave a quick wise word about fighting and violence being a last resort, and next time the boys think it's necessary, talk to their parents first. They said they weren't angry with Matt, but he could have confronted Axel without starting the fight. Axel may have gotten upset and took the first swing, and then Matt could have finished it. That would be better. But the real thing is, they are males and are supposed to protect the females in their lives and kudos to Matt for taking that obligation seriously.

✝✝✝

January 11th, 2 AM Saturday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky's eyes opened at the soft noise he heard. Lifting his arm carefully from around his wife's waist, he rolled away and crept silently from the room. He could see the light on in the kitchen as he moved stealthily down the hall. He stopped when he got to the end of the hallway and could see who made the noise. He smiled. Amari stood precariously on the top of the step ladder Bree usually kept tucked next to the refrigerator to help her and Taylor reach the higher shelves.

'Mari was trying to reach the lid of the industrial sized glass cookie jar. The jar would be too heavy for him to bring it down. Ricky was sure his goal was to reach inside and pull out a few of the giant white chocolate/macadamia nut cookies. He moved closer.

"Would you like some milk to go with that?" Ricky asked.

Amari gasped and started to fall, but Ricky reached out and steadied him. Amari looked down at Ricky with his large brown eyes full of fear and that really bothered Ricky. "Grab me one too," Ricky said with a smile.

Letting out a sigh of relief, 'Mari grabbed two cookies and handed them to Ricky then climbed down.

"Um, Mom, uh, Miss Bree, she said I could get a cookie whenever I want one, unless it's time to eat."

Ricky nodded. "You can call her 'mom' if you want to, and that's right. You're welcome to get a cookie as long as it's not close to meal time."

Amari jumped down and put the ladder away.

Ricky smiled at him. "Want some milk?"

Amari nodded. "Yes sir."

Ricky poured two glasses of cold raw milk and pointed to the kitchen table. "Let's go sit over there."

They sat and immediately each took a giant bite of cookie and chased it with the

milk.

"Man that is good," Ricky said. "Did you and Britt help make these?"

Amari smiled. "Yes sir."

"Well, you did a great job. So, tell me, why are you awake in the middle of the night?"

'Mari frowned. "I had a bad dream."

"I see. Wanna tell me about it?"

He shrugged. "Some bad man was tryin' ta get me."

"A bad man? What did he look like?"

"He looked kinda like Mr. T-bone."

"So, in the dream, did he hurt you?" Ricky asked.

"Naw, he couldn't catch me. I was running from him and he was waay far back cuz I'm so fast."

Ricky nodded. "Awesome."

"Yeah, and then I woke up, and I was hungry."

"Yep." Ricky said. "That happens to me a lot."

"Yeah, me too," Amari said with a smile.

Ricky chuckled. "So, tell me, son, do you like living here?"

Amari smiled and nodded. "Yes sir."

"Even when I ask you to do chores, or to say 'yes sir' and 'yes ma'am' or to help your sister or to join us on the beach?"

He nodded. "Yes sir. I mean, sometimes it's hard to wake up, but once I get awake, I like doing the martial arts on the beach or downstairs too. I like doing it and I wanna be a black belt one day."

Ricky nodded. "You will be as long as you keep working at it. What else do you wanna do one day?"

"What else?"

"Um hmm. Like, what do you like to do?"

"I don't know."

"Do you like to play sports?"

"Uh, yes sir. I think so. Caleb plays football on a team and he's only a year older than me. And, Micah, he's in my class at school, he plays baseball. Not now, but he's gonna play again when it gets warm. And I like basketball a lot."

Ricky nodded. "Would you like to go see a basketball game?"

"A real one, like on TV?"

Ricky smiled. "Yep. A professional team like the Lakers."

"Wow. Really?"

"Really. And you can bring a friend if you'd like."

"Wow. Really?"

"Of course. But it also might be fun to go see some high school or college games too. It's a different vibe."

Amari nodded excitedly.

"Cool," Ricky said. He sighed. "So, 'Mari, is there anything you wanna talk about?

Anything that's bothering you?"

Amari shrugged.

"Are you afraid of anything?" Ricky had seen fear in Amari's eyes several times lately and it bothered him.

Amari shrugged again.

"So, what I mean, is, well, just answer this question. What would be the scariest thing in the world for you right now?"

Amari looked down.

"It's okay, buddy. You can tell me anything. I won't tell anyone."

"Not even Mom?"

"Um, which Mom?"

"Oh, Miss Bree."

"Okay, I won't tell her."

Amari sighed. "Well, the scariest thing would be if my real mom came back and made us go live with her again. I know that sounds mean, like, I'm being mean to my real mom, but she don't love us like you and Miss Bree do, and she don't even like us."

Ricky sighed. "Okay. So, first, it would only be fair for me to tell you that once she gets well, she might feel differently. She might realize that she actually does love you."

"Maybe, but she don't love God like you do."

Ricky nodded in understanding, and thought it was great that young Amari understood the importance of that. "Maybe you can teach her about God," Ricky suggested.

Amari frowned. "It sound like you want us to go back to live with her?"

Ricky smiled. "Let me be completely honest with you, Mari. I want to keep you forever. I'm just trying to be fair to your mother. She might get well. She might feel sorry for how she treated you and Britt. She might want to show you that she can do better. And mostly, Jesus wants us to forgive people who have wronged us. Your mom wronged you. We need to find it in our hearts to forgive her, because, well, like, everyone makes mistakes, right? I know I do. Do you?"

Amari nodded. "Yes sir."

"So, I don't want you to be afraid though. Your mom is gonna spend several years in jail, and by the time she gets out, you're gonna be a teenager and you won't feel so afraid anymore. My job is to prepare you to handle anything. But I'm confused about something. Why don't you want me to tell Bree that you're afraid your mom will come back?"

"Oh, uh, well, because she's so nice. And she's pregnant. And it would make her worry and I don't want to make her worry."

Ricky's eyes moistened. "Wow, Amari, ya know, that actually is a very manly thing you just said."

"It is?"

"Yes sir, it is. You're only nine-years-old and you're already trying to protect your mother."

"Which mother?"

He smiled. “My wife. And from now on, I’m gonna just call her your mother, because she’s gonna be for a long time, if not forever.”

Amari smiled. “I like calling her ‘Mom.’ When I do, she smiles. I think it makes her happy.”

Ricky nodded. “I know it does.”

“Would it make you happy if I call you, Dad?”

“I already told you that you can call me that.”

“Yeah, but would it make you *happy*?”

Ricky smiled. “Oh, yes it would. I would love to be your father.”

Amari smiled and nodded. “I love that too. Dad— thank you for helping me and Britt. I’m gonna try really hard to like, I mean to be like, a really good son, like young Eric.”

Ricky nodded. “It’s easy to be a good son if you do two things, and those two things are to honor your father and mother, aaand, learn about God and do what He wants you to do. If you do that, you can’t go wrong.”

Amari nodded.

Ricky yawned. “Well, let’s head back to bed and see if maybe we can get some sleep.”

Amari smiled sleepily. “Yes sir.” Remembering what young Eric often did, he took both his and Ricky’s glasses to the sink.

Ricky nodded in approval. “Good job, thank you. Come on, I’ll walk you to your room and we’ll pray together.” He put his arm around the boy.

Amari couldn’t help it. He leaned his head firmly against the man’s side. He loved this man and didn’t ever want to leave him.

✝✝✝

Ephesians 6:1-4

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.
“Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment
with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long
in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up
in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Chapter Four

January 11th Early Saturday Morning
Davis Home, Huntington Beach, California

Division Chief Jefferson Davis lifted his tiny daughter from his wife where she sat on the side of their bed. He softly kissed the baby's forehead and gently placed her in the bassinet that stood a few feet away in the corner of their bedroom. He turned back to smile at his wife. She was as beautiful as the day he'd met her. Though that day she was dirty and bloody and sweaty and injured and pitiful. He'd found the kidnapped daughter of a US Senator after she'd killed one of her abductors and run into the woods near Honey Lake in northern California. He'd happened to be at his vacation home nearby shooting his guns at targets nailed to trees. She'd thought he'd been shooting at her.

"What are you staring at, Jeff?" she asked, reaching up to smooth down some of her hair.

He sat down on the bed, pulled her to him and kissed her softly.

"I was looking at my wife and thinking about how grateful I am to have her in my life and to have her as the mother of my children, and to have her right here near me where I can talk to her and love her."

"Oh, honey, what has you so sentimental?"

He sighed. "My job I guess. Remember the client who'd been poisoned a few weeks ago, up in Montana?"

She nodded. "Yeah, the guy who owned that big theme park, right?"

"Yep. Well, Agent Owens went undercover and got the evidence needed to prove that he had indeed been poisoned with arsenic. The reason was the wife getting revenge for her husband having an affair. She discovered he slept with an employee, and instead of confronting him about the situation, she began poisoning him slowly. He's gonna survive, and his wife has been arrested. The whole episode was so dark, though. It really makes me grateful for the love and wholesomeness that is in our marriage."

Mickey nodded at her husband encouraging him on, realizing his need to talk about it.

"The more I see, the more I learn. In so many cases and in all of those crime cases you see on TV, the real ones I mean, there is absolutely one thing that would have kept all of those horrible things from taking place. I mean, in most of those cases, it's a beautiful start; a couple falls in love, they have a happy wedding, they have children, not necessarily in that correct order, but still, in all of those cases it seems like a beautiful beginning. But then one of the spouses strays. Or one gets mean, sometimes because of the stress of finances, or, alcohol or drug addictions. But finally, they cheat or some of them fight and become abusers. Then there's divorce proceedings and then

there's a fight over custody or child support and what began as a beautiful love story turns very ugly, full of hatred and violence."

He stopped and sighed. "And even if the bad stuff, like the horrific murder plots, doesn't start right away, it starts through the children who grew up in that bad situation."

"And so," Mickey began, "what have you learned? What is the one thing that would have stopped all the ugliness?"

Jeff sighed. "Well, you know I'm gonna say God. But people don't understand when we just say, 'things would be different if there was God in their lives.' It's what God gives to us. The rules He gives us to live by. If those people had merely followed just the simple ten commandments, all of that evil would be held at bay. No lying. No cheating. No stealing. No adultery. Honor your parents. Don't want what you can't have. Honor the Sabbath and turn your hearts to God on at least that day. Don't be so disrespectful as to use God's name in an angry curse. Don't worship idols, like money, or celebrities, or porn or fantasies. And of course, the first and really most important, worship only the one true God. But I mean, even if you're not religious and you don't want any part of the first four commandments, just keeping the other six rules would have prevented every single case I've ever seen or heard about. God makes it so easy. He doesn't give us those rules to make life hard, but to make it beautiful and filled with love and joy. He knows what He's doing."

Mickey smiled. "Jeff, that was beautifully put. Next time you're asked to give your testimony, you should say what you just said."

He smiled and shrugged. "I just want everyone else to have the same joy and beautiful marriage that we have."

"Our marriage is indeed beautiful," Mickey agreed. "And you and I both know why. It's because we've been shown how to put God first by the wonderful people around us, like the Kinos, the Lees, the Tanners and all the others in our giant adopted family."

Jeff stroked her lovely face. "Yes, we have been shown and we've learned well. When we put God first, there is only goodness and light and beauty and love. Though when I first found you, I wasn't really living a good Christian life."

Mickey smiled. "Ah yes, right before you met me I believe you'd been living with that Laura person." Mickey made a face. "Thank goodness she didn't appreciate the amazing man you were, and left you."

He grinned. "Thank God. But you know, I didn't really start understanding that God is really real until YOU. You made me see Him."

"Me? I wasn't even religious."

"You were goodness and light and sweet and kind, and you made me want to have a marriage like Ricky or Grandmaster Kino, or Keegan or Chief Lee. It was you who made me reach out and realize it was their relationship with God that made their marriages so perfect. You made me want to give you what they had. God brought you to me, and I needed to rise up and be the best I could be. And then, my love, you gave me sons, and now I can see God working in their lives and that is beautiful. And now,

I have a daughter to love and protect and teach and I have to do it right."

"You're doing an awesome job, Jeff. I'm so proud of you and all you do. I'm still feelin' it. Are you?" she quoted from the time they'd first met and had been afraid their feelings would change because they'd fallen in love so quickly.

He grinned. "Still feelin' it, babe."

Mickey smiled. "Who knew this lovely, four bedroom home would end up being so full of people?"

Jeff nodded. "So, actually, I wanted to talk to you about that."

Mickey frowned.

"Why are you frowning?"

She sighed. "Well, if you're gonna change your mind about Brook staying here it's gonna break her heart, and mine too."

"What? No! I wouldn't do that. I'm happy to have Brook with us. I wouldn't trust anyone else to help her the way I know we can help her."

"Okay, then what do you want to talk about?" Mickey asked.

"Well, babe, I'm thinking it's time to buy a new house. A bigger house. Daniel is thirteen now and ready to have a room of his own and find his own identity other than 'the Davis boys,' and I'm sure Jeremy would be down with that. And Scarlett can have her own room. And Brook can have her own room. That's five rooms right there. We just need one more, for the Coleys when they come to visit, but maybe eight all together would be better because you never know who else might come along."

"A new house? Really?"

"Yes, really. Since becoming Division Chief, I'm making good money, and with your book sales and now your publishing sales, we can buy a much larger home. I was looking online, and we can get a six or even eight bedroom home. And then, when Chris and Rissa come to visit later this spring we'll have plenty of room. What do you think?"

Mickey nodded. "I think it's exciting and a lot of work."

"We'll have plenty of help so don't worry about the work. Why don't you start looking at what you want. Just remember, we'll need a yard and a pool."

"Well, I'd want to stay in the Huntington Beach area," Mickey said. "Then the boys won't want to have to change schools."

"I agree with that. Do some research and see what you can find. Okay?"

Mickey smiled. "Okay!"

Jeff wrestled her back onto the bed and pulled her close. He kissed her softly and stroked her cheek. "I love you, Mick."

"I love you."

He sighed. "Okay, now that we've talked about the house, I wanna talk to you about Brook."

"What about her?"

"How do you think she's doing?"

Mickey frowned. "Well, physically, Jeffy says she's doing better and the baby is fine. She and I have had several long talks and cried together a few times. I gave her my book."

"Which one?"

"My story, *Mom Married a Monster*. She's still reading it, but now she knows that I more than understand what she went through. The difference is, I didn't get raped or impregnated. I was only tortured physically and mentally."

"Only," he murmured.

She shrugged. "Perspective."

"Has her mother reached out?"

"No. But Brook reached out to her and then I did too."

"You did? When?"

"A few days ago."

"You didn't tell me you were gonna do that."

"Sorry. It was a spur of the minute thing. Brook had spoken to her mom and in a fit of anger, she let her mother know that Brook would be staying here with us and would never go back to her mother."

"So, what came of it?"

"Currently Mrs. Hopkins is extremely angry with Brook and with us."

"How does she figure she has the right to be angry?"

"Well, what she told Brook and also me, is that she feels like Brook purposely broke up her marriage."

"Well, does she not understand that Brook isn't faking it? Because she is definitely carrying his child."

Mickey shrugged. "She has no choice but to believe, but she's talking like Brook seduced him."

"If she'd done that she wouldn't be so traumatized," Jeff spat, and then pressed his lips tightly together.

"I know," Mickey went on. "It infuriates me too. There is a lot of baggage to sort through. For now, I just want Brook to know that she's loved and cared for by us and that we'll help her and support her and give her the best care."

"Is she still thinking about giving the baby up for adoption?"

"Yes. She feels like it's the best thing she can do for the child. But she doesn't want it to be adopted by anyone close by, so that she's not tempted to see the baby and get attached to him or her."

"So, like, an out of state adoption?" Jeff asked.

"Yes, and, I told Bree, and Bree told Ricky, and Ricky immediately thought of the Appels. So, he called John and told him Brook's story. John didn't want to get Jodi's hopes up, so he's not gonna speak to her about it until Brook is a little further along and still wants to have her baby adopted. As soon as he knows for sure it's a go, he'll present it to Jodi."

"Oh! Wow. Well, that is certainly far away and you couldn't ask for a better family or place to raise a child. What does Brook say?"

"I haven't told her yet. I just found out."

✝✝✝

January 11th 9:30 AM PST Saturday Morning

Ameritech Private Airport, Long Beach, California

Gabe Tanner's eyes blinked open when the captain announced their descent into the Ameritech private airstrip. He sat up straighter and looked around. There were twelve other recruits on the flight. They'd all enjoyed a nice conversation as they traveled toward a new life, one filled with challenges and opportunities. All of them were pretty much fulfilling a need to become a force for good. All of them were older than Gabe. Most were twenty or about to be twenty and a few were twenty-two and twenty-three and one was twenty-five. All of them knew who Gabe was, though he tried to play that down. He didn't want anyone to get the idea that he thought he was above anyone else, and he didn't want them to think he was getting special treatment because his father was a Division Chief or because he was good friends with Division Chief Davis or the Kinos and the Lees.

As the others on the flight stirred, Gabe's mind went to the extremely tearful farewell he'd received from his family, both last night and this morning. Last night had been Heather's twenty-fifth birthday party, so the entire family and friends celebrated together. His father did his best to make light of the separation, letting them know that at least he wasn't on his way to Afghanistan. It didn't help much. All they knew was the last time he'd left to pursue his career training, he'd almost died, and that memory made this farewell a sober experience.

His mother tried to keep a brave face. His sisters said they were gonna fly out to visit him. The men, Jericho, CJ, Nolan, Peyton, Dalton, Uncle Chaz and Uncle John all cheered him on and made jokes. Charlie and Matt Stewart and Lucas Murphy had a little bit of hero worship thing goin' on. Sweet little Hannah cried and buried her face against his chest. He knew she clung to him much like Josie Brooks clung to young Eric, needing to be close to the guy who'd saved her. Gabe knew it was really Taylor who'd saved her, but he didn't remind her of that because, well, Taylor wasn't there for her either.

The hardest one to say goodbye to was little Iris. She cried and begged him not to go, both last night and this morning. He tried to explain to her. His older sisters tried to comfort her. His mother was calm and told him she would be okay and that Iris was learning to be strong, and to lean only on Jesus. That actually helped Gabe mentally. His father told him to not let it get to him and focus on what he was trying to accomplish.

Saying goodbye to his new brother and sister was also hard. By the time he saw them again, they'd probably be crawling. He'd held them and sang to them, and kissed them, and prayed over them. He'd prayed over all of them, each member of his family. Now, he was focused on the job at hand. He had training for one week before school started. His school load was less than a full-time student, but more than a part-time student. Combine that with the training, and there would be little time for anything else.

But before focusing on the job at hand, he had today and tomorrow to focus on his girl. As a picture of her floated through his mind's eye, he sighed. She and her brother were actually meeting him on the tarmac. He smiled. He'd be seeing her in just a few minutes. He ran a hand through his hair to make sure he looked okay and took out his

phone.

"Hey everyone. Tanner here. Hope your day is goin' good. My day is about to be really, really good because as I speak, my plane is coming into LA and I'm gonna be seeing Taylor in a few minutes. Right now, I'm sitting here with a bunch of really awesome guys, who are all about to become Ameritech agents and they've given me permission to introduce you."

He turned the phone around and aimed it at each guy. Each of them smiled and stated their first name and told a little about themselves. When they finished, Gabe turned the camera back on himself. "So, as you can see, Ameritech only hires the best. These guys are top notch and will be doing some great things in the future. So, for now, I'm gonna sign off while we land, but I'll be back on soon when Eric Kino the third is gonna be videoing me when I get off the plane. See ya in a few."

He tucked his phone away.

"How do you do that, Tanner?" one recruit asked.

"Do what? Talk on a video?"

"Yeah, like, do you get nervous?"

He shrugged. "I used to. Now, I just see it as serving God. I'm not worried about offending anyone, or saying the wrong thing. I just say what God puts on my heart."

"So, you don't plan out what you're gonna say?"

"Well, when I give my little Sabbath day lesson I think and pray about it beforehand. The rest of the time, I just say whatever. If people don't like it, they don't have to listen."

The guys all nodded as the plane touched down. In only a few minutes they taxied to the small terminal and deplaned.

Gabe grabbed up his giant duffel and a backpack and stood and shook the hands of his fellow agents. "Guys. I'll see some of you in the JETT dorms tomorrow night. The others, I'm sure we'll run into each other."

"Yep, see ya Gabe," James Cader said. "Go have fun with your hot girlfriend."

Gabe smiled. "Always a good time with Taylor around. Come on out with me and I'll introduce you to her and her brother."

"That would be cool," one of them said.

They headed down the small flight of stairs. Gabe went last. The others stood nearby watching. Young Eric Kino held up a phone videoing. Gabe came down the stairs. Taylor screamed and ran to him and jumped up into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. Their excited kiss lasted several moments and he swung her around and put her down. He looked deeply into her eyes and smiled. "Hey Tay."

She giggled. "Hey."

"It's really good to see you."

"You too."

"So, let me introduce you and Eric to these guys."

He introduced all twelve guys and only needed a little help to remember names. Taylor smiled prettily and shook hands and took time to speak with each one. Young Eric did the same and then said a few words to Gabe's and Taylor's followers, wished

them well, told them to stay strong and to look for Gabe's Sunday video tomorrow and ended the video.

Waiting patiently nearby was Senior AIC, Assistant Agent in Charge, Agent Bentley Trout who at one time was Jordan's bodyguard but then was promoted. Finally Trout nodded. "All right recruits, load up. This bus is gonna take us to the facility where you will be given your room assignments. Once you're settled, you're free until 9 PM Sunday evening. Let's load up."

Young Eric then took a few minutes to speak with the man who'd kept his girl safe for several weeks. A man she'd become attached to and had been very sad to see him go.

"Senior Agent Trout," young Eric said. "It's really good to see you. Jordan almost came with me today. If she'd known you were gonna be here, she definitely would have come."

He chuckled. "Liar. She's at ball practice and I know she has Agent Kim with her now. She's in good hands."

Young Eric nodded. "I have no doubt. But it's you she loves."

Trout smiled. "What can I say? When you're good, you're good."

Young Eric rolled his eyes.

Gabe stuffed his luggage into the trunk and then he and Taylor climbed into the back seat of young Eric's car. Eric poked his head in the car. "You guys ready?"

"Good to go," Gabe said.

Eric got in and looked into the rear view mirror. "Hey you two, no messin' around back there."

Gabe chuckled. "I won't do anything that you and Jordan wouldn't do."

Young Eric frowned. "Hmm, I guess I can't say anything to that."

Gabe smiled. "Right."

"Well, anyway, keep your seat belts fastened."

Taylor giggled.

They drove to the house and as they did Taylor talked about her dance classes and an upcoming show in March and a recital in May. She talked about a big senior outing out to the canyons also in March, and asked Gabe if he could possibly get time off to come. He told her he wasn't sure and would check it out.

At the house, Gabe was greeted by Ricky and Bree and welcomed back to their home.

Gabe smiled warmly at the boy who blinked up at him. "You must be Amari," he said brightly and extended his hand.

Mari smiled. "Yes sir."

Gabe laughed. "Good job on that but you don't have to call me sir. I mean, I'm just a kid."

Amari blinked. "You a pretty big kid."

They all chuckled.

"Well, Taylor has told me all about you and how happy she is to have a new little brother."

Amari grinned and Gabe shifted his gaze to the small girl.

"Hello."

"Hi."

"So, you must be Brittney?"

She nodded.

"Are you shy?"

"No, I'm not shy. I was just waiting for you to talk some more."

He chuckled. "Oh. Okay. Well, Taylor has also told me all about you and how happy she is to have a little sister."

Brittney nodded and smiled. "Are you on TV?"

"Nope. I just make videos and I'm about to go back to school and work my job too."

"You gonna live here?"

"No, I have to live at the dorm at my work. But I'm gonna stay here tonight."

"Where ya gonna sleep?"

"Hmm," Gabe looked up at Mrs. Kino.

She nodded. "Same room."

He smiled. "I'm gonna sleep in the room right by the stairs."

"Cool," Mari said.

"Well, Gabe," Bree began. "I'm sure you're hungry after your long flight. Lunch isn't for a few hours, but I've put together some snacks."

He grinned. "Awesome, Mrs. Kino. Thank you so much. Let me go run my bags upstairs and I'll be right down."

Taylor smiled. "I'll go help him."

Young Eric chuckled. "Yeah. You do that."

"But Taylor, it's Saturday," Brittney complained. "Aren't you gonna play with us?"

Taylor grimaced.

Bree sighed.

It was Ricky who stepped in. "Well, first of all, let's ask her properly."

"What does that mean?"

"It means to ask the right way. Just because Taylor played with you last Saturday, you can't just expect that she's gonna play with you every Saturday. Taylor is a busy girl and has a lot of things to do. So, you can ask her properly and see if she has time to play with you a little bit. If she does, fine. But if she doesn't, you accept that. Anyway, Britt, you don't really have much time yourself, because after lunch I thought you and Mari were gonna come help young Eric and I teach a class at the GTCC over in Compton."

"Oh yeah, I forgot."

"You guys are going to the new *Gabe Tanner Community Center*?" Gabe asked quickly, his enthusiasm showing.

Ricky nodded. "Yes, why? Would you like to tag along?"

Gabe glanced at Taylor with a hopeful look in his eyes.

She sighed. “Well, I guess if ya can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.”

Gabe chuckled. Brittney and Mari cheered.

“Well TayTay,” young Eric said. “You didn’t expect to come home, go upstairs and keep Gabe all to yourself did you?”

She made a face. “I was hoping to. Just for this one day.”

“You’ll still be with him,” Bree reminded her. “And right now, you still have a while before lunch, so go on upstairs and have him unpack his suit for tomorrow and see if it needs steaming and if so, bring it to me. And then you can have some alone time.”

“Yes ma’am,” Taylor said softly. She took Gabe’s smaller bag, Gabe gathered the rest and they headed upstairs.

Gabe looked around the room. He’d spent a whole lotta time in this room and he realized it too, felt like home. He quickly unpacked his bathroom supplies, while Taylor unzipped his suit bag. The dress shirts looked okay, so she hung them in the closet. The suit, did look a little rumpled so she ran it downstairs. When she came back she carried with her a tray filled with the snacks her mom had prepared for Gabe.

He smiled when she came in and set it on the small table in front of the two wingback chairs. He went straight to the door, closed it, locked it, went and grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the bed.

“Uh, what are you doin’?” Taylor asked.

“I’m makin’ it up to you.”

He pushed her backward and she fell onto the bed. He laid down beside her, leaned over her, stroked his fingers over her cheek, leaned down and kissed her. She gave a soft moan. He sighed. When he finally lifted up, he looked deeply into her eyes. “I love you, Taylor Kino.”

Her eyes teared up and she sniffed. “I love you too. I missed you so much.”

“It’s only been a week since New Years.”

“I know, but that was only a few days, and before that it was almost a month. And the time before that it was three weeks. And the time before that, you died.”

“Wow, you are really keeping track.”

“I remember because every moment away from you is torture.”

“I get it, babe. But I thought you told me you were gonna help me by not complaining about being apart. Because, remember, I’m not gonna get to see you very much even though I’m here.”

“I am gonna help you. I am gonna be strong. I’m just disappointed that I won’t have you all to myself just this one day like I thought I would.”

He smiled. “Brittney was disappointed too, that she didn’t get *you* all to herself for just this one day.”

“Yeah, well, Brittney’s only five.”

He nodded. “My point exactly.”

Taylor’s eyes opened wide. “Are you saying I’m acting childish?”

He had to think fast. “Nope. Because if you are than I am, but babe, I’m just sayin’ we need to be strong just a little longer. We need to be better than a five year old. We

can do this, Tay. And we can do it well or we can do it poorly. I usually try to do things well. You?"

She nodded. "Yes of course, me too."

"It won't be much longer before we dodge rice pellets and jump in the car and drive away to a romantic honeymoon and I make love to you. Hold on. You are *gonna* be Mrs. Gabe Tanner, Mrs. Taylor Kino Tanner and it's gonna be awesome. That is, if you'll still want to marry me when the time comes."

"I will."

"I sure hope so," he said as he leaned down and kissed her again. When he raised his head it had been several minutes and he found he desperately wanted to touch her, so, he rose off the bed, cleared his throat and smiled. "Let's see what's on the tray!"

✝✝✝

January 11th 1:30 PM EST Saturday Afternoon

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Melaynah Appel held the lead as Rocky walked in a circle around the corral. She smiled at Hannah who sat atop the large, yet gentle Bay horse. "That's good, Hannah. Sit up a little straighter and move back and you won't be thrown out of the saddle like that. Good. So good, sweetie. You're ready to try a trip around the corral on your own if you want to."

Hannah's eyes got big. "No. I don't want to. Not yet."

Laynah smiled. "That's fine. We'll take it slow." She watched her a minute. "I gotta say, sweetie, you look mighty pretty sittin' up there with your hair blowing back."

Hannah smiled, then looked around. "Is Charlie gonna ride today?"

Laynah smiled a knowing smile and shook her head. "Right after martial arts this morning, Charlie and Matt had to go with Dad to help the Mannings move."

"Oh," she said, obviously disappointed. "Where are they moving to?"

"They're moving to Texas where Mr. Manning got a new job."

Hannah nodded. "I hope I don't ever have to move."

"So, you like it here?"

"Yeah, I love it here."

"Even after what happened at school yesterday?"

She shrugged. "Well, I'm sorry Matt got in trouble, but I mean, Axle didn't hurt me. He was just being mean. He didn't hit me or anything, so, I mean, it's wasn't so bad. Charlie told me that not everybody is nice."

Laynah nodded. "Well, he's right apparently. But here in Pine Forest, most people are pretty nice, so don't let what Axle did bother you."

"I won't."

Laynah pulled Rocky to a halt. "Need help getting down?"

Hannah shook her head as she correctly lifted her right leg over the backside of the horse, removed her left foot from the stirrup and gently jumped the rest of the way to the ground.

Laynah nodded. "Good job. Charlie is a good teacher."

Hannah smiled. "Who taught you to ride?"

"My dad. I started riding when I was about three or four. I used to ride with my dad walking beside the horse and Jake would ride next to me with his dad walking by him, and then sometimes Jake and I would ride together until he was about ten. When the Tanners came down, Heather and the girls also started riding with me. They're older than me."

"But Jake is the same age as you?"

"Jake is nine months older than me."

"So, were you and Jake always together? I mean, like boyfriend and girlfriend your whole life?"

She gave a soft laugh. "Well, I think I pretty much always liked Jake, but we were never girlfriend and boyfriend and it seemed the older he got, the more he ignored me."

"Why?"

"Well, he says he actually did like me, but he knew he was goin' off to be in the military and he didn't want me to have wait around for him. But I finally explained to him that I'd do that anyway and he admitted he'd always liked me and we fell in love pretty fast and got married last June. We had three months together before he was deployed."

"Deployed means, they sent him off to war?"

"Yes, well, we're not at war right now, but they still sent him off. Jake is special forces and they're always needed for bad situations all over the world. Right now he sneaks into places where terrorists hide and rescues people and gets them to safety."

"That's pretty cool," Hannah said as she walked with Laynah to put Rocky up. They worked together to untack him. Then Hannah grabbed a brush while Laynah grabbed a curry comb and they went to work grooming the horse.

"So," Hannah began. "I guess you miss Jake a lot."

Laynah nodded. "So much. I try to focus on other things, but he's always in my mind and heart. Every second."

"That sounds kinda sad."

Laynah smiled. "Well, it's not fun. I can't wait for him to come home."

"When is he coming home?"

"We're never exactly sure, but he could be home maybe in March, because he left in September and his deployment is supposed to be for six months. But it could be shorter, or it could be longer."

"Do you think Jake will, I mean, when he gets home, do you think he'll mind me living with his parents?"

"Oh, honey, of course he won't mind. Jake will love you being with his parents. I'm sure he'll see you as a little sister and he'll want to get to know you and be a brother to you."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. Jake is a really good guy."

"Is he like Charlie and Matt, or like Gabe?"

"Yes he is. He loves God. He loves his family. And he'll love you, Hannah. I'm sure of it."

"Do you have pictures of Jake?"

"Do I have pictures," she said with a laugh and pulled out her phone. They stood close together, thumbing through dozens of pictures.

"Why does he have his shirt pulled over his face there?" Hannah asked.

Laynah smiled. "He told me to stop taking his picture and I wouldn't stop and he pulled his shirt up and over his face. And I told him that was even better and took a bunch of pictures."

Hannah looked hard at the pictures. "He's got a lot of muscles."

Laynah nodded dreamily. "Yeah he does," she said softly.

Hannah nodded. "He's really cute. I hope he likes me."

"I promise you, he will."

"Maybe one day Charlie will like me too."

Laynah's eyebrows rose. She glanced at Hannah as she brushed Rocky. "Charlie likes you a lot, Hannah. I promise you, he'll always be a good and loyal friend to you."

Hannah nodded. "Yeah, but I mean, one day, I hope he likes me. You know, likes me," she said emphatically.

Laynah tried to keep the smile from her lips. "Oh! Well, that's interesting. So, are you telling me that you *like* my brother?"

Hannah smiled. "I really do. I've been trying to keep it a secret, but I really needed to tell somebody and I don't have any friends yet. I mean, I don't have any girlfriends yet."

Laynah smiled kindly. "I'm glad you felt like you could tell me."

"Yeah, I thought about telling Mom. But I think she doesn't want me to like a boy yet."

"Why do you think that?" Laynah asked, though she knew that the consensus with the adults was that Hannah wasn't ready for any puppy love relationships yet.

"I just feel it. I think they probably think that I'm all messed up by what Carl did to me, and I'm like half crazy or something. But I'm not. I know Carl was evil and I know I prayed and asked God to help me and He actually did send me help. He sent Taylor and Gabe. And I'm not all messed up in the head. Even the therapist lady said I was handling things pretty well. And I really like Charlie."

Laynah didn't try to talk her out of it because she realized that Hannah just needed to talk about her feelings without anyone telling her to not feel that way. "What do you like about Charlie?"

"Well, he's so nice. And he's really cute, don't you think? And he's calm. It seems like he's really calm and I like that. I like that he doesn't make me nervous or worried that I might say the wrong thing or like, ask the wrong question. He doesn't laugh at me. He always listens when I talk to him. And he smiles at me when he sees me. He's really strong. And like, I don't know, I feel like I can tell him anything."

"Wow. Those are some pretty nice things to say about Charlie."

"Don't you like your brother?" Hannah asked.

Laynah giggled. "Oh, yes, of course I like him. I love him and I'm so proud of him and the young man he's becoming."

"So you guys get along?"

"Sure. I mean, we use to argue sometimes, but not too much over this past year. He's growin' up."

Hannah nodded. "One day, I hope he likes me. I can wait. Maybe when I'm in high school."

Laynah's eyes misted. Sweet little Hannah Brown was saying things that sounded so much like Laynah herself had thought all those years, mooning after Jake Appel and wondering if he would ever notice her. She hoped Hannah wouldn't go through the same hurting and longing and wishing and dreaming that Laynah herself had. Though, Laynah acknowledged, it had been worth it.

✝✝✝

January 11th Saturday Afternoon

Atlanta Division, Ameritech Offices, Calvary, Georgia

Division Chief, Senior Agent Keegan Tanner glanced around the conference table as he listened to the report being given him. Things were coming into alignment perfectly to be able to do what he wanted to do. At the table were two young and brilliant Ameritech agents, who were about to go on a very dangerous assignment. They would be working with the GBI, Georgia Bureau of Investigation, with Corporal Byron Camp, a man Keegan knew personally from his FBI days. He was a good, trusted man whom Keegan had personally vetted.

Keegan had given this top secret assignment to fellow brother-in-arms, Senior Agent Brayden Turner, a JETT and close friend from Keegan's military days, who'd been special forces with Keegan and John Appel in Afghanistan. He was six years Keegan's junior and had joined up with Ameritech a few years after Keegan and was currently giving his report.

Brayden nodded as he spoke. "And as you know, GBI Special Agent David Frank was able to work undercover in the Rome City commissioners office as an intern. After several months, his report is that what you suspect is confirmed. There are a lot of nefarious things goin' on. And not just favoritism, or cronyism, but drug deals, chop shops and even prostitution."

"What about the mayor?" Keegan asked.

Brayden nodded. "The current mayor we believe to be a straight shooter as far as his running the town. Though not in his personal life. He's turned a blind eye and his hands are tied because the police chief has made veiled threats to expose his affairs to his wife and to the public."

Keegan nodded. "Go on. Tell me about this chief of police."

"Our guy, Agent Merrill, has been keeping his ear to the ground. He says the police chief is new. He's only been in office one year. He's touted as the youngest chief in the town's history."

"How old is he?"

"He's twenty eight."

Keegan shook his head.

"Here's the story. It begins with the former chief. Darnell Hunt married Trudy

Jackson when he was twenty two. He was a new police officer. They had a son, Moss Hunt when Darnell was twenty-five. They had another son, Barry Hunt, when Darnell was twenty-seven and he had a daughter, Emery, when he was twenty-eight. Financially, they were barely surviving, so he took some side jobs, moonlighting as security for some private companies. His wife tried to do the suzy homemaker thing the best she could. Kept to a budget, attended PTA meetings, and rec sports.

"The marriage started to break down when the stress of trying to provide got to Darnell and his eye started wondering. Not only did he start hookin' up with women, he started hookin' up with quick ways to make a buck, which included of course, the sale of drugs."

Keegan sighed and nodded.

"Financially, things eased," Brayden went on, "when Darnell was able to hold a few things over some of the city commissioners and they made him chief of police when he was thirty-five. That's when things in Rome, Georgia began to get pretty dark. There was rampant crime. A lot of burglaries, car theft, drugs, shoplifting, etcetera, and Darnell Hunt was involved in pretty much all of it. A few of the commissioners tried to fire him. One, a woman, ended up raped and beaten. They never found the perp. Another, a man, had his business burned down. After that, no one ever spoke out again.

"Darnell was police chief for seventeen years. He retired a year ago, at the age of fifty-two, and the new chief of police is none other than Moss Hunt, Darnell's oldest son. Rumor is Darnell Hunt intends to run for Mayor next year."

"Looks like we've got our work cut out for us," Keegan muttered.

"Well, one more thing that I think you will find very interesting. Moss Hunt was in the same high school graduating class as Agent Blackmon and Mr. Jericho Jones and of course, Mr. Joshua Jones."

Keegan blew out a breath. "Okay. Got it."

"Moss is a bad dude. Maybe worse than his father. It would be cool if you or someone could strike up a conversation with one of them and get their take on Moss Hunt," Brayden added.

"Well, first,' Keegan began, "if I did that, CJ would know immediately that something was going on and I don't want either CJ or Jericho to know that I'm looking into what happened there ten years ago." He sighed. "But I may have a secret weapon I can use."

"Secret weapon?"

Keegan smiled. "I might take my daughter Rose into my confidence and have her ask a few questions. She could handle that with ease."

Brayden smiled. "She's worked in that same capacity before and ended up fallin' for the guy."

"Well, she eventually realized the guy was a loser. And now, she's completely fallen for Jericho, so, asking him a few questions about his high school class isn't such a big deal."

"Good. Now, here's another bit of information that could give us a way in," Brayden said.

"Lay it on me."

"It's the daughter. Emery. Word has it that she hates her brothers and hates her father but is terrified of them."

"Do you know why?"

"Rumor says the brother, Moss Hunt, he offered his sister to one of his friends as payment for a lost bet. He delivered her to a motel room and let the guy have his way with her."

"Where did you hear the rumor?"

"That's our other guy, Agent Tate. He struck up a conversation with Emery one night when she was drowning her sorrows at a bar. He told her some sob story of his own and got her to trust him. Apparently, they are pretty much a thing."

"A for real thing, or just working together?"

"Jury is out on that one, but I'm leaning towards real."

Keegan sighed. "That is a highly dangerous situation for both of them."

"Yep. And I know you know it. So, she pretty much trusts him completely and I'm thinking if we can work this right, and she feels safe enough, we can take down the whole family and all of their associates which includes at least eight other operations in or around the Rome area."

"Well then, we're gonna need more men," Keegan muttered.

"We definitely will, if we wanna do this right in one fell swoop and with as little bloodshed as possible."

"Okay. Good job, Bray. I'll arrange for the army of agents and coordinate with Byron and Special Agent Frank. I don't wanna drag this out too long. Come up with a plan of action, get all locations, all names, and we'll do a giant sweep."

"Roger that," Brayden said.

✝✝✝

January 11th 1:00 PM PST Saturday Afternoon

Gabe Tanner Community Center, Compton, California

Gabe smiled up at the large tan brick building with his name on the front in large metal letters. The building, a former church and school, and the parking lot were completely surrounded by a high red brick colored wrought iron fence. It was obviously recently painted and landscaped and it was a very attractive complex, especially compared to the surrounding area. It was right where it needed to be.

"Whaddya think, Gabe?" Ricky asked as they stood in front of the building.

Gabe nodded. "It's pretty darn cool." He glanced around. "There are a lot of cars here."

"Well, they all know that you're coming along," Taylor said.

Gabe sighed, because he still didn't know what to say or think about all that kind of stuff. He grabbed his bag out of his car, the one he'd been given as a birthday present from the Kino/Adams family last year. The others there to help with the demo walked up to join them.

"Wow, this building looks awesome," Jordan said as young Eric put his arm around her.

"Gabe!" Logan said as he and Melody joined them.

Gabe hugged Logan, whom he considered a brother. "So good to see you, Logan. I watched every church service and your Christmas concert. You are really amazing, bro. Can't wait to buy your album."

"Thanks, man. You know I love doing that stuff."

"I know and it shows."

Gabe smiled at Melody, and then took her hand and leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Nice to see you Melody."

"You too, Gabe. It's like a light just went on when we drove up and saw you standing there."

Gabe smiled. Logan nodded. "She ain't lyin'."

"Thanks for that," Gabe said softly and smiled as JoJo and his new girl came to greet him.

"JoJo," Gabe said with a grin. "So good to see you!"

They hugged heartily. "JoJo, I gotta say, I am so impressed at the way you preach. There's something about how you put things, and your enthusiasm, I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, kiddo," JoJo said glibly. "So, Gabe, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend," he said softly, smiling at the girl by his side. "Raylynn, this is the Gabe Tanner."

Grinning, she held her hand out to Gabe, which he took and pressed between both of his hands. "Raylynn, I'm really happy to meet you."

"I'm really happy to meet you too, Gabe. I'm a huge fan of your daily messages. My sister too."

"Aww, thanks. Your sister, is she here today?"

"No. She is actually at a little get together she was invited to by Pastor Pat. She and Melody's brothers and Bristol Palma, and Brook and Zoe and Ryder are working at cleaning up the back yard space behind the church and then they're gonna go to the house next door to Reverend Clark's home. Pastor Pat is thinking about buying it and he's been given permission to check it out closely, so he decided to get their take on the place and then he's gonna treat them all to pizza."

"That's interesting. It's kind of a strange group to invite, don't ya think?" Taylor asked.

Raylynn shook her head. "I thought so too, but then Kaylee says it's not so strange. First, all those people live close by, but mostly Kaylee says she thinks Pastor Pat is interested in Bristol."

"Really?" Melody said, both surprised and pleased.

"Yeah, but, isn't he like way older?" Taylor asked.

"He's twenty-seven. Bristol will be nineteen soon, so it's a little less than nine years," Raylynn supplied.

Melody nodded. "That's not too bad. Especially because Bristol has always been very grown up and mature most of her life. She's like an old soul. Though that might be because her grandmother raised her."

Ricky nodded. "She's a mature, good girl and Patrick Barnes would be very good

for her because he's a good guy who loves the Lord. Now, let's get the mats and equipment out of JoJo's truck and head inside."

"Yes sir," the brothers all chirped.

"Hey 'Mari," Gabe said. "If you'll carry my bag that will help me and I'll go help carry the mats."

Amari smiled. "I got it."

✝✝✝

Matthew 5:16

" Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Chapter Five

January 11th 1:00 PM PST Saturday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"And that was the end of that," Eric said as he closed the book. He looked around at six sets of beautiful brown eyes as they peered up at him. Five of them belonged to his children, and one pair belonged to his beloved wife. He reached out and touched her cheek gently. "Sweetheart, you look tired."

She smiled. "I'm sleepy. Your voice kinda puts me to sleep."

He frowned. "Hmm, I'm that boring?"

"No, silly, you make me feel that comfortable."

"I not sweepy," Manny said quickly.

Eric smiled at him. "What is it you're really trying to tell me Man-man?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Um, I twyin' to say I not sweepy."

"I think maybe you're trying to tell me that you don't think you need to take a nap."

Manny frowned.

"Daddy, could we pweaze have one more stowy?" Angelina asked sweetly.

He looked around at their sweet faces. His heart tumbled with the immense love he felt. They were four months shy of their third birthday and they were extremely intelligent, very teachable, and learning to think on their own and voice what they were thinking and he loved them. Oh how he loved them. "Just one more," he said as his phone vibrated. He pulled it out of his pocket. "Yes, Agent Martinez?"

"Sir, Agent Jon Sweet is at the gate and would like to see you. He says it's important."

"Do you know Agent Sweet?" Eric asked the agent.

"Yes sir."

"Are you sure it's him?"

"Yes sir."

"Ask him why he didn't call me."

"I already did sir. He said his phone got smashed in a motorcycle accident and he lost your number."

"Well, that's a fine excuse," Eric joked. "Send him up."

Eric looked up at the faces that were no longer smiling. "One more story, but it looks like your mom will have to be the one to read it to you."

"I wove when Mommy weads to us," Noah said.

"Me too," Angelina said. "But we wish you could stay."

"Sorry kiddos, I have to see what Agent Sweet's problem is."

"Before you go, will you do the nicknames game again?" Nate asked.

Eric smiled. "Okay, but they're getting pretty long. I might need help."

"I'll help you," they all said.

Eric pointed at each child as he spoke. "Angel face that won the race. Man-man ate a can-can of, um..."

"Jam jam," Abe yelled.

Eric smiled. "Good enough." He pointed at Abe. "Abraham helped eat the jam which made Abe very brave. Noah soon will grow-a, so he can walk in the snow-a. And Nate can't wait to drive a car through the gate!"

Nate grinned with pleasure. "Mine is the best."

"Uh uh," Manny said.

"We are not in competition with each other," Shelley said firmly, raising her eyebrows at Nate.

Nate sighed. "I think they are all weally good names."

Eric smiled, rose from the floor and pointed at the kids. "One more story and then into bed for a nap. Got it?"

"Got it," they all yelled.

Eric bent and kissed his wife's cheek and headed out. He trotted down the giant staircase and opened the front door. Jon was just getting out of his car. Senior Agent and Team Leader Jon Sweet had trained with Jeffy's husband Cam back eight years ago. He was an Aussie, with a big smile and a giant personality. He was confident and cool and jovial, but could be very lethal. He was a big, strong guy, as were most AMT agents, but Jon was a little taller and a little slimmer. Blond hair, tan skin, brown eyes, and that winning smile put him in the sights of most every female he came across.

Eric smiled. "Jon, good to see you."

Jon came up to stand in front of Eric and bowed. "Grandmaster Kino, always a privilege and honor to see you, sir."

Eric bowed and offered his hand. "So, you don't look any worse for wear."

"Sir?"

"Motorcycle accident?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm not hurt, but the other guy didn't fair so well and neither did my phone. Chief Adams has a new phone waiting on me to come pick it up, but I needed to come see you since I was down this way helping Agents Ward and Wyatt with their plans down in Hillcrest."

"Ah yes, so another *Gabe Tanner Center* is coming soon?"

"Well, I don't know about how soon it will be, but there will be one in Jordan's neighborhood eventually. Agents Ward, Brown, Wyatt and myself are all going in on it."

Eric's warm smile showed he was pleased. "Wonderful. If you need any help, for any reason, please include me."

"Thank you, sir. I'll let them know."

"Good. And also, before you leave today, I'd like to simply make a donation to the cause."

Jon smiled. “All is appreciated, sir.”

Eric smiled. “Well, come in. Can I get you anything? Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“Actually, I’m starved.”

Eric nodded with a smile and headed to the kitchen. “Let’s make up some lunch and sit at the table and talk.”

Jon nodded. They worked together to make up some giant sandwiches and Eric warmed up some of Shelley’s potato soup. Once they had their meal arranged, they sat together and Eric blessed the food.

“So, I’m intrigued. Tell me Jon, what can I do for you today?”

Jon smiled as he put a spoonful of soup in his mouth and his eyes opened wide. “Wow, that is really good. It hits the spot.”

Eric smiled. “Shelley will be glad to hear you say that. Everyone always teases her about her cooking skills, but really she’s come a long way. It’s just a running joke now. But she takes it like a champ.”

“Mrs. Kino is such a sweet lady. I’ve always loved her.”

Eric nodded. “I can understand that.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s upstairs napping with the little ones.”

Jon nodded and sighed. “I have to say once again, how grateful I am to be able to sit here and speak with you, Grandmaster Kino. I mean, I’m grateful that you’re alive for me to do this.”

“Me too.”

“So, Grandmaster Kino, I, uh, I have something amazing to tell you. It has to do with your book.”

“My book?”

“Yes sir. Your memoirs. I had a few copies of the book and I took them with me when I went home to visit my family. I gave one to my parents because I wanted them to understand the people I work for, how it all got started and why working at Ameritech is such a privilege. I wanted them to understand why I have such great respect for you and your whole family and the Lees and their families.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“No sir. I’m not being kind. I’m being honest. Anyway, so, I brought along an extra book, I thought, you know, in case there’s someone I needed to give a gift to. I have a friend down under who works as a guide at *Glass House Mountains National Park.* I promised him I’d go and visit him next time I was in Australia, and I did. He and I went on a little excursion around the mountains and I felt something so amazing. I’ve lived in Australia all my life, and had never been to Glass Mountain. But that feeling I had there, well, I’ve only felt that feeling one other time in my life and that, was when I prayed for you with Gabe on a giant zoom call. There was such power on that call and there was such power like, emanating from the mountain.”

Eric stayed quiet and allowed him to tell his story.

“There’s a little town on the north side of the mountain called Laurel. It’s a lovely little place with lovely people. That’s where my friend lives. His name is Henry Brown.

I've known him since we were kids and we used to bike, in the mountains pretty regularly. Harleys, not bicycles. So, while I was there, Henry took me to his little church last Sunday. It's the *Glasshouse Mountain Unity Church*. It's a tiny place. Henry and I drove up on our bikes and were immediately surrounded by kids. Great kids.

"Inside the church, I mean, inside the chapel area, there were only about ten rows of benches. Henry took me around and introduced me to a lot of the people. They were great, real friendly. I spotted a man in the very back pew, over in the corner. He was older. He appeared to be of mixed blood. Part white, part Aboriginal. He was sitting calmly with a kind smile on his face and wise eyes and he had a powerful bearing about him, but mostly, what drew my attention is he reminded me of someone."

"Who?" Eric asked.

"You. He gave off the same kind of energy. He had light and power around him. He was sitting next to a white woman who looked very kind and had a sweet smile. I asked Henry about them. He said they were a very special part of the church congregation. He said the man was their very own 'cleverman' except he was Christian."

"What is a cleverman?" Eric asked "Like a shaman?"

Jon nodded. "Yes. A cleverman is a healer in the Aboriginal culture."

"Interesting."

"I thought so too and I was drawn to him, so I asked Henry to introduce me to him. His name is Ces Iman. The woman was his wife and her name is Hazel Iman. Henry left me there for a bit, and I sat and talked to the Imans before the church service. It turned out, Ces Iman, is a doctor. A medical doctor. He had my complete interest and I didn't want to stop talking to him and his wife, and was disappointed when the meeting began and I had to go take my seat with Henry. As soon as the service ended I looked for Mr. Iman again but he was not in his seat. Then, someone tapped me on the shoulder and I turned and it was him. It almost took my breath away standing in front of him. He's powerful. Again, it's the exact same way I feel when I'm in your presence."

"Well now, Jon, I'll take that as a great compliment, though you know, whatever power you feel around me, it's the power of God that I pray for daily, to lead me and guide me."

Jon laughed. "Grandmaster Kino, that is the exact same thing Mr. Iman said to me when I remarked to him how he made me feel. Anyway, so, Mr. Iman invited Henry and I to their home for the evening meal. They live in one of the larger homes in the town, though compared to your home it's tiny. It was a lovely place, white brick, well landscaped and manicured. Modern kitchen, four bedrooms, two baths. It was lovely and comfortable and clean and it too, had a welcoming feeling, just like your home. I asked him if they had children, and found that they had a son and daughter who were swept out to sea when they were teens out boating one summer day. It was a very sad story and I could see the pain in his eyes, but then he smiled and assured me he would indeed see them again.

"I found out that Mr. Iman was actually seventy-five-years old. It was crazy

because he looked maybe fifty. And again, that is the way I feel about you. No one can believe that you're seventy. You look forty-five to fifty and Ricky looks thirty to thirty-five. Really, it's crazy."

"Healthy living, Jeffy's protocols and the spirit of God," Eric explained.

Jon nodded with a smile. "I guess so. Anyway, we went on to have a wonderful meal and I told Mr. Iman how he reminded me of you. I told him all about you and all about what happened to you this past year and gave him some videos he could watch. I wanted to tell him your story. The story of the cave, but I was afraid I wouldn't do it justice and then I remembered that I had the extra book of your memoirs. I went out to my bike and pulled it from the pack and presented it to him. I realized then that he was the reason I brought along the extra book. I was supposed to give it to him.

"The evening ended and Henry and I made our way back. He had to get me to the airport in the morning because I had to get back to work. I was sad to be leaving that special place. Early the next morning, I got a call from Mr. Iman. He was very emotional. He said he needed to tell me something. He said he'd read your book and couldn't stop crying and praising God at the same time."

Eric didn't say anything, but only nodded his head, feeling hopeful that they had just found another one of the twelve. So far, there was Ronald Clark, Alo Quinn and himself.

Jon went on. "I'm sure you'd rather hear Mr. Iman's story from his own lips, and maybe you can arrange that, but I want to, or very much need to tell you what he told me."

"Please do. You can't bring me this far and not tell me the story."

Jon chuckled. "I guess you're right about that." He drew a deep breath. "Ces Iman was an only child. He was actually a twin, but his brother was stillborn. His mother and father loved him dearly. They tried to give him a sibling, but they were never able to have another child. They lived in an aboriginal settlement, and Ces, which, by the way, means 'sun', was desperate to leave and meet other people. He knew there were other people to meet because his mother was a white woman. She told him to never go beyond their village and the hunting grounds because it was very dangerous. Still, he would constantly wonder away from home when he was just a kid. He made friends with wildlife. It seemed wherever he went, the animals would come to him. It wasn't out of the norm for him to wonder off for days at a time, making his mother worry, but his father understood Ces' need to explore.

One time, when Ces was eight-years old, his father decided to allow Ces to come with him to deliver some baskets and some fish to a small marketplace near the sea. They loaded a handcart with their ware and headed to the village. Ces was fascinated by what he saw. There were so many people, and most of them were white. He wasn't afraid of them though. His own mother was white, though she didn't dress in finery such as he was seeing. However, he told his father he'd seen people like that before, all dressed up, when he dreamed at night. His father hadn't known what to think of that.

While his father delivered the baskets to a man in the marketplace, Ces looked around him to take in as much as he could. He said he was mesmerized. There were

vendors selling fishing gear, some selling household gadgets he'd never seen before, there was clothing, fine clothing, and a large area where Aboriginal art pieces, hand-carved boomerangs and the such were being sold. There was also food; pies and sausages, sweet treats, fresh fruits, and of course a fish market which is where his father went to deliver the fish.

"Ces stood in one place looking over everything with wonder when his eyes met the eyes of a little white girl who stood across the roadway, eating a piece of candy. She smiled at him and Ces said he looked behind him, because he couldn't believe the pretty little girl was smiling at him. She then pointed at him and nodded her head and he nodded back.

Then, he said he was horrified to see a larger boy come up to the little girl and grab the candy from her hand and when she tried to get it back from him he hit her in the face and pushed her into the roadway. The girl looked up as a cart with two horses came barreling down the street. She was about to be trampled. Ces ran forward into the street right in front of the horses, put his hand out and willed them to stop. And they did. The man driving the cart got out and started yelling at Ces, but he didn't care. He turned and helped the girl up. Her nose was bleeding and he started to wipe the blood away, but a woman screamed.

"Next thing Ces knew, he was being grabbed and shaken. A man yelled at him and slapped him across the face. Ces' father tried to get to him, but he was grabbed by other Aboriginal men who held him back, knowing that if he tried to help his son, he would be killed. Ces fell to the ground as a few others kicked him and warned him to never, ever touch a white girl again.

"The little girl was screaming, trying to make everyone understand that Ces had helped her and it was a boy named Billy who'd hit her in the nose and knocked her down. Finally, they realized what she was saying and they turned and left Ces alone, not one of them bothering to help him up or apologize for the mistake. Finally, Ces' father was released and he rushed to his son's side. He lifted him up in his arms and carried him to the now empty cart and started on the long walk home. A woman chased him down and held out some water and a cloth. She said only two words. 'Thank you.'

After that Ces' parents never brought him to the village again. It took him a long time to heal. He had a cut lip, a bloody nose, a large lump on his head, and several large bruises on his arms, back and legs. He said later, he found he had a broken rib. Even with all that, he begged to go into town again, if only to see the little girl once more and make sure she was okay, but his parents refused. They kept a very tight rein on him after that.

"Then, one night, when Ces was ten years old, he decided he was going to make a run for it. He felt a pull so strong that he had to go back into the village. He slipped away by the moonlight and headed toward the village. But as he walked, a dense fog blew in from the sea and Ces couldn't see where he was going. He decided to sit and let it pass. He sat by a tree along the path and drank water and ate some dry crackers he'd brought with him and fell asleep. When he woke, it was daylight. The fog was gone, but there was something strange going on. He couldn't find the path. The tree had

been right next to the path, yet the path was no where in sight.

He circled around the tree and tried to decide which way to go. He knew he had to make a decision. He looked at the sun and headed east, back to his village, at least he thought he did. As he walked, he began to hear sounds, something rustling around the surrounding area, grunting and snorting. He stopped moving. It sounded like a sounder of feral pigs and they were no fun to deal with. He found a stick and tried to move quietly away. He thought he'd succeeded when he suddenly heard a growl and then a loud squeal and a group of six pigs came running at him.

"He took off running, swinging the stick as he ran, trying to knock them away. He came to a hillside and started down as fast as he could go, but tripped and fell and tumbled down the hill. That didn't seem to deter the pigs. They chased him down the hill. He stood up and looked for a tree to climb, but there was none close enough. But he did see a small cave and went straight to it. The cave was only a few feet deep, but it provided protection for his back and sides, and he stood at the cave trying to fight the pigs off with the stick.

"He was getting tired and it seemed the pigs were not gonna give up and leave him alone. Then, he tripped and fell and the pigs moved in so fast. They gored him with their tusks, in the arm, in the leg. He said he knew he was gonna die." Jon stopped and smiled. "How am I doing on the storytelling?"

Eric laughed. "You're doing fine. You have me on the edge of my seat, so please continue."

Jon nodded. "I had to stop to get myself together, because what happened next was so cool. Okay, so, he thought he was about to be gored to death by a bunch of pigs, but suddenly, a pack of dingoes showed up. The pigs stopped charging immediately and ran off. There were seven dingoes, and here's the really cool thing. They were all white. Seven white dingoes."

Eric nodded with a smile. "Wow!"

Jon smiled. "Right? But there's lots more. First, Grandmaster Kino, the odds of seeing an albino dingo ever in your lifetime is huge. To see seven of them together, is other worldly for sure. Ces, said the dingoes stood still all around him. He was bleeding pretty badly and a few of them licked at his wounds. They stood guard over him. He tried to stand but he thought his leg was broken. He was in so much pain, but he knew he had to get home, or find some food and water. He hadn't eaten or had anything to drink since the night before when he'd had water and crackers. They were still in his pack that he'd dropped somewhere along the way down the hillside.

"He finally worked his way to his feet and picked up the stick to try to use it as a crutch to hobble his way home, but one of the dingoes snatched the stick out of his hand and a few others nudged him with their noses and forced him back inside the cave and pushed him down to sit. He thought they were either protecting him or possibly he was their prisoner. Maybe they were saving him for a meal. He was confused and frightened.

They sat with their backs to him and kept watch over the area. Every time he tried to make his way out, they pushed him back down. He stayed there all day and through

the night. He was cold, hungry, thirsty and bleeding. He was feeling sick and nauseated and was pretty sure he was gonna die. He actually tried talking to the dingoes, reasoning with them that they thought they were protecting him but they were gonna cause him to die. But they wouldn't relinquish their mission.

"He finally gave up. He was dizzy. He was falling in and out of consciousness. He remembers asking the dingoes, why are you trying to kill me? Do you want me to die? Are you gonna eat me? Why not just kill me now? Why are you doing this? Then, he said at one point he thought he heard one of the dingoes speak to him. He heard, 'don't cry to me, cry out to the one you call the Great Creator, He's listening.'

"So, he turned his heart and mind to God and begged him to send the dingoes away and help him to get back home. He said he begged all night, all the next day, and finally, in the wee hours of the next morning, he gave up. In his mind he said goodbye to his parents and to his friends in his village. He was so weak from loss of blood and infection from the pigs tusks. He changed his tune. He said stuff like, 'Okay, Great One, I'm yours. I'm sorry. Please comfort my mother and father. I'm sorry I hurt them. I'm hurting too. I hurt so much and I can't take anymore. My leg feels like it's on fire. My head hurts whenever I open my eyes. I'm gonna die and it's okay. I would like to meet you. Will I be able to meet you? I'm ready to go now.' You get the idea."

Eric nodded. "I do indeed."

"Right then, right when he said I'm ready to go now, the dingoes parted and a man stepped into the small cave and knelt next to Ces. He said the man was glowing. He was surrounded by light. He had long dark hair, and was dressed in a white robe, and he smiled and held a small glass bowl of water to Ces' lips and commanded him to drink small sips. He said the moment he did, he felt warmer and much less dizzy.

"The holy man told Ces that they were in a very sacred place. He told him that Ces had a special mission in life to fulfill. He told him that though Ces believed in a Supreme Being who created the world, that being is actually very much different than the 'Rainbow Serpent' that the Aboriginals believed in. First Ces must understand that God is real and that He created man in His own image and that a serpent is the furthest from who God is. He's not some mystical creature in the sky. Ces must understand that He is the one true God. He told him He has to understand that Jesus is the true only begotten Son of the Father, and that He came to earth through a virgin birth and died on the cross willingly to pay for our wrongdoings, and that he was resurrected and ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of God. Jesus is our Lord and Savior. He told him he had to live a noble life, full of honesty and integrity and love and kindness and that he had to fight evil every chance he got. He told him it would not be easy but God was going to give him a gift and he must make the most of it and it will help to ease his way."

"And what was the gift?" Eric asked. "The gift of healing?"

"Yes sir, and he said Ces must remember that he is not healing people with his own power, but that in Jesus' name, he will be able to heal and create miracles and cause many people to be saved. Dr. Iman told me that he had no idea at the time how he was gonna do what he's done, but he walked by faith and has allowed the Lord to lead him

and guide him. The Lord helped him make his way through medical school in a world that wasn't quite ready to let him even go to any school. But the story is much longer than this, and I think Dr. Iman should tell you how all of those miracles came about. Still, the point is, I heard about Gabe calling you that day to confirm that there are all together twelve people called. Eleven other people like yourself, and I was thinking that this man has to be one of them.

"He was lost for three days. An angel type being appeared to him and called him. He was ten years old. It's too much like your experience to push aside, don't you think?"

"I absolutely do," Eric said quietly. "We will not push this aside. Let me ask you a question though, one I know my wife is going to ask me."

Jon nodded.

"The little girl, did Ces ever see the little girl again? The one he saved from being trampled?"

Jon smiled. "Indeed he did. She and her mother endured beatings from her father when he found they'd gone to the hospital to visit the 'half-breed Aboriginal boy' who'd been missing for three days. The girl who'd been only six when Ces saved her from the charging wagon, was eight years old when she visited him in the hospital. Her mother had a feeling she needed to see the boy, and went to visit and knew immediately that Ces was the boy who'd saved her daughter and taken a beating for it. The girl befriended him, and over the next few years the two would meet secretly by the harbor.

Then there was a disaster in the town, which, by the way, was on the *Sunshine Coast.* A tropical cyclone came through and caused a lot of damage. Many people were hurt from buildings collapsing. Ces and his father came into town to see if they could help anyone. A man lay in the street screaming in pain because his leg was broken in two places and the bone was sticking out of his leg. Ces knelt down beside the man and put his hand on his shoulder. People tried to make Ces leave, but he refused. The man immediately calmed down and then fell asleep. Ces then pulled on the leg, pushed it back into place and used his shirt to bind the leg. Later, the doctors were amazed that the leg bone had been aligned perfectly. The ER doctor searched out and found Ces and talked to him for a long time, getting from him the whole story I just told you.

"The doctor then took it upon himself to make sure the indigenous children could come to school and be educated. He took Ces into his own home and taught him how to read and write and do math and when Ces took a college entrance exam, he aced it. In college, guess who he ran into? The little girl, who was now a beautiful young woman. Her name— was Hazel."

Eric smiled. "Finally, the ending I was hoping for."

Jon chuckled. "I wish you could meet her. She's such a lovely woman, a lot like your wife, and they are such a great couple."

Eric nodded. "I'm guessing you have all of their information so that I can reach out to them?"

"I do. And Dr. Iman is expecting your call."

"Wonderful."

They were interrupted by the sound of little feet and Jon looked up to see five little ones in their white martial arts uniforms.

Eric stood and smiled at his children. "Well, Jon, we're about to have a martial arts lesson. Would you care to join us?"

Jon smiled. He already knew, that when Grandmaster Kino invites you to participate in a lesson with him, you don't turn it down.

"I'd be honored," Jon said as he stood and bowed. "Let me just give Chief Adams a call and let him know I've been detained."

✝✝✝

January 11th, 3:00 PM PST Saturday Afternoon
GTCC, Compton, California

The demo had been a giant display of skill and talent. Raylynn only watched, but the lowest belts, Melody and Jordan, who were yellow belts, had done a fine job. At the end, kids were invited up to try breaking boards, which was always a crowd pleaser.

Now, Gabe Tanner and Taylor Kino sat at a table next to young Eric, Logan Adams, and JoJo Adams. All of them were busy signing autographs for the large group, both kids and adults, that had come to see the martial arts demonstration.

Ricky and Mark mingled with the crowd, talking to the counselors who volunteered at the center and greeting parents, though there weren't a lot of parents present. Both Ricky and Mark were using this opportunity to assess how the GTCC is being run according to guidelines and what improvements needed to be made in their stipulations. They wanted to be sure someone wasn't opening a center in Gabe's name and then doing their own thing. Those who run a GTCC had to follow along with the beliefs that Gabe held since it was those beliefs, his Christian principles and testimony, that had people donating to the cause and they had to stay true to them.

Mark told Ricky there's been several people who wanted to open a center under Gabe's name, but make it a bit "more inclusive." That was the wording, which sounded good, but what they actually meant was do away with most of the Christian stuff. They'd had to explain that Gabe's principles on life were completely connected and embedded in his Christian faith and that if they couldn't handle that, then they could not put his name on it.

They explained that one didn't have to be a Christian to be welcome at the centers. All were welcomed. But that everyone needed to know that if you go to a *Gabe Tanner Community Center*, there will be prayers and blessings on food, and Christian principles instilled in all activities. For example, no immodest clothing, no music with immoral words or ideas, no cursing on the basketball courts, and similar conditions. If one didn't want to attend because of those things, then so be it. God's children will hear His call, though it may take a little bit to clean out their ears.

Raylynn, Melody and Jordan stood together chatting as they watched their guys conversing with kids who adored them. They were signing hats, shirts, pictures and footballs.

"I'm so proud of our guys," Melody said. "I mean, not that they're famous, but, watch the way they take time to look each kid in the eyes and talk to them."

Jordan nodded. “I agree. I’ve always admired the way the whole family really sees other people as important individuals. Not just quote, fans, ya know? They don’t act all high and mighty.”

“They really are some good guys, aren’t they?” Raylynn said softly. “I’m so in awe of JoJo. He came into my life so quickly. Every time he smiles at me, it takes my breath away.”

Jordan giggled. “Yeah, these guys have a way of doing that. They take my breath away, and every female within fifty feet of them. They have such a power about them.”

Melody nodded. “They are bright lights for sure. Aren’t we so blessed to have them in our lives?”

“We are,” Raylynn said on a sigh.

Melody quickly looked up at her with a smile. “Have you told JoJo yet that you’re in love with him?”

Her mouth opened. “Oh! Um, no. Do I make it that obvious?”

Jordan smiled. “Oh come on, Ray, who wouldn’t spend some time with JoJo and not fall in love with him?”

Ray smiled. “It makes me nervous. I’ve never really had a boyfriend. And my feelings for him are so strong, I worry that one day this will end.”

“Does that mean that you want it to go on forever?” Jordan asked. “I mean like, you want to marry him?”

She sighed. “Wouldn’t that be something amazing? But I don’t dare think that, because I don’t want to be disappointed.”

“I have a feeling, Raylynn,” Jordan began. “That the three of us are gonna be legally related one day.”

Melody smiled. “We will all be sisters-in-law. Oh my goodness, wouldn’t that be great?”

Jordan put her arms around both girls’ shoulders. “It’s gonna be so much fun. But it’s also gonna be hard work.”

“Why do you say that?” Raylynn asked.

“Well, like, I’ve been informed that the Kino/Adams families work very hard from the moment they wake up until they drop at night. They work doing whatever God puts in their path, no matter how tired they are.”

“Well that doesn’t surprise me and I’m ready for it,” Raylynn said.

Jordan looked around. “As a matter of fact, we shouldn’t be standing here talking while they are busy working. We need to do something too.”

“What should we do?”

Jordan looked around. “Well, let’s go talk to some of the kids that seem to be standing alone.”

“Talk to them about what?” Raylynn asked.

“Ask their names. Ask about their likes and dislikes. Ask about their families. We might come across someone who just might need a boost or a smile or a hug.”

Melody nodded. “Let’s get to it.”

Young Eric watched as his girl had her arms around JoJo’s and Logan’s girls. He

smiled. Those three beauties were simply amazing. He watched as they broke apart and turned to go talk to some kids. Leaning toward JoJo he nodded at the girls. “What do you think they’re up to?”

JoJo watched a minute. “I think they are working for God.”

“Yeah they are,” Logan said softly, his eyes glowing with the love he felt for his Melody. He shifted his gaze to the teen girl in front of him.

“...and I’ve watched all of your videos. You’re really good. When does your album drop?”

Logan smiled. “It will drop this spring. Keep following and I’ll make the announcement as soon as I know.”

“I will. Will you sign a picture for me?”

“You bet,” he said as he scribbled across the 8 X 10 she shoved at him. “So, are you here all alone?”

“No, my little brother is here somewhere. We love this place. We spend all of our time here.”

“That’s fantastic. Your parents too?”

“My dad comes sometimes. My mom died.”

“I’m so sorry. How long ago?”

“It’s been like, eight years now. My brother was a baby. She had cancer. My dad tries really hard to take pretty good care of us. He has a girlfriend now.”

“What do you think about that?”

The girl shrugged. “She seems nice. I think she likes us kids.”

“Well, that’s a good start. So, if you ever wanna talk to someone about it, you know there are counselors right here at the Center who will just listen and give you advice if you want it. No pressure.”

“I heard that, but I don’t know how to find them.”

Logan nodded and stood. “Let’s go see right now how you would do that.” He took the hand of the young teen girl and walked with her over to one of the directors. He explained that she didn’t know how to ask to speak to a counselor and that maybe they need to be clear about that and make sure all of the children know there is someone there for them always.

Meanwhile, Amari and Brittney stood around with some of the younger children. Amari was being very careful to watch out for Brittney because he’d been asked to do so by his new dad. Mari smiled. His new dad. That was such a cool thought. He had a dad. He’d never known a dad, and Mari wanted to please him and make him proud, because this man was like a superhero in Mari’s eyes. He was Ricky Kino. A movie star. And he was every bit as cool in real life as he is in the movies.

“So, kid, why’d the Kinos bring you along? Are you like, his best student or something?”

Mari eyed the older boy, wondering if he was gonna cause trouble. He glanced over at the man who was his new dad, then back at the boy. Mari shook his head. “Naw, I’m not his best student. I just got started.”

“Really? So, like, how hard was it to learn the little thing you did?”

"Oh, just a few days. I have to work on it every day until I get it perfect."

"So, is Ricky Kino your teacher?"

Mari nodded. "Yeah. He's the best."

"He's legit for sure," the boy said. "Where do you take?"

"Well, I only been to a *Kino Martial Arts* place a few times and it was a different place each time. But he usually teaches us at home, like on the beach or downstairs when it's raining."

"He comes to your house?"

"Oh, uh, no, I mean, he's there. I mean, like, we live with him. I mean, well, he's our dad."

"Liar."

Brittney, who'd been quiet up to that point wrinkled up her nose and narrowed her eyes. "My brother is not a liar."

"Is too. He's not your dad. He's white. You're black. He ain't yo dad."

"He's our foster dad," Amari explained. "And he's only half white."

The boy eyed Ricky Kino. "What else is he?"

"He's Hawaiian."

The boy looked the man over again, trying to see it.

"Anyway, Daddy says it doesn't matter what color his skin is, or what color my skin is," Brittney suddenly said. "He says the only things that matter is Jesus and love."

The boy frowned. "So, where's your real dad?"

"I don't know where my dad is, but Mari's dad is in jail."

"Hush, Britt."

"Hmm, so then, how'd you luck out to get to live with Ricky Kino?"

Amari sighed because he should tell the truth. "He was there when my mom OD'd and he asked the people if he could take care of us."

"Your mom dead?"

"No, she's in the hospital," Mari replied.

"But she's probably in jail now," Britt added.

"Shut up, Britt."

Her eyes opened wide. "I'm gonna tell."

Amari blew out a breath. "I don't care. You need to learn to shut up."

Brittney turned and ran to Ricky. He knelt down in front of her with a smile on his face and listened to her complaint. He asked a few questions, then took her hand and came to speak with the boys.

"Hey guys," Ricky said.

The older boy's eyes opened wide. "Hey."

"Hi Dad," Amari said with hopeful eyes.

Ricky smiled. "Son. So, who's your new friend?"

Amari frowned, because he wasn't exactly a friend.

"Uh, I'm Jerry."

"Jerry, nice to meet you. Is that a nickname?"

"Yeah, my real name is Gerald, after my grandpa."

"Oh, I see. That's nice. How old are you?"

"I'm eleven."

"Do you live nearby?"

"Yeah, just down the street a ways."

"So, you walked here?"

"Yeah, I walk here pretty much every day."

"Do you like it here?"

"Yeah. I like to play ball here."

"Why?"

"Uh, why?"

"I mean, why do you like to play here and not somewhere else?"

"Oh, well, like, it's not so rough here and the younger kids get to play too. And here, like, the older kids don't push us around."

"So, you feel safe here, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know why?"

He shrugged.

Ricky turned to Mari. "Amari? Do *you* know why Jerry might feel safer here than other places?"

"Yes sir, I, uh, think I do."

"Tell me why."

"Because there are rules here about no fighting and if you break the rules you don't get to come here anymore."

"So?" Ricky pushed.

"Well, like, so because there are rules 'bout no fighting, I know that nobody is gonna fight, and everybody gonna keep the rules, because if you don't, you have to leave, and if you don't get to come here, you don't get to play where you feel safe and that means you don't get to eat."

Ricky nodded. "Good job. You are right. So, rules, and obeying the rules is pretty important sometimes, right?"

"Yes sir."

"What are some other rules here, Jerry?"

"Um, no pushing. No cursing. No fighting. No cheating. No stealing."

Ricky nodded. "Good."

"So like, are you really their dad?" Jerry asked.

"Yes. Right now, my wife and I are their foster parents. We are really blessed to have these two in our home."

"What happens when their mom or dad gets out of jail?"

"Well, Jerry, that's a pretty personal question, but I'll tell you the answer; 'Mari's father will not be getting out of jail until 'Mari is a grown man. His mother won't be released until he's a teenager. We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. My personal feeling is I love my two foster kids like they were my own, and I hope I can always be their father. But I want to help you to understand something, Jerry, ya see, sometimes

it's not very polite to ask people you just met such personal questions."

Jerry looked down. "I didn't mean nothin' by it. I was just curious."

"I understand why you were curious. It's kind of a strange situation. Since we're being so personal, may I ask you, do you live with your parents?"

"I, uh, live with my mom and my grandma."

"And how are things there?"

He shrugged. "It's okay. My mom works at a doctor's place, and my grandma works at a hair place. So, like, they ain't home until later."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I got two brothers. One is sixteen and one is eight."

Ricky nodded. "Oh, I see, so then, you're a middle child. Are your brothers here today?"

"My little brother is here. He's that kid over there with the red shirt."

Ricky glanced where Jerry pointed. "Okay, cool. So, how about your mom or grandma, are they here?"

"No, they at work."

"What time were you gonna leave here today?"

"We was gonna stay until they close."

Ricky nodded. "Well, how would you and your brother like to have some dinner with Amari and Brittney and I at a restaurant, and then I'll take you home?"

Jerry's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Of course, really. We never lie. Not ever, right 'Mari?"

"Yes sir."

"So, would you like to come eat with us, Jerry?"

Jerry nodded. "That would be cool, Mr. Kino."

"Good. Can we call your mother or grandmother and get their permission?"

"They won't care."

"Well, I'd feel better if we do that. Then we'll finish getting loaded up. You can help. I'll talk to the director here and let him know that we're taking you and we'll be off."

Jerry smiled. Amari smiled, but Brittney frowned. "But Daddy, 'Mari told me to shut up."

"Oh yes, that's right. We'll talk about that at home, privately. For now I'll just say, Mari, please don't be rude to your sister and Britt, please don't blurt out personal information to everyone that asks. You have to learn that some questions are personal and not for everyone to know."

Amari smiled. Brittney frowned. Her chin quivered and Ricky lifted her into his arms. "Now, my sweet little girl, let's see if you're strong enough to help me by carrying that blue bag over there out to JoJo's truck," he said before he smiled and kissed her cheek.

✝✝✝

January 11th, 5:00 PM CST Saturday Evening
Memphis Hilton, Memphis, Tennessee

Justice pulled his Tahoe up to the front of the Memphis Hilton. He was tired. He'd been driving for eight hours, stopping only for gas. His stomach was slightly upset from gas station fried food. His system was not used to that. His entire family was the role model for pure wholesome foods. It was a battle they fought daily. Justice himself was one of the assistant VPs of the *Pure Foods Brand* conglomerate, and the face of the company until just recently. Then tragedy happened and his devastation had been so great, he had to take a break. He had to find himself again, and he had to finish what his brother and sister had started.

Memphis, was the halfway mark to his destination. He stopped the car, reached in and grabbed his computer case and his bag, handed his keys to the valet and went to check in. The staff was friendly and efficient and he was grateful. Once in his room he set up his laptop, answered some office memos and then ordered dinner from a local health food restaurant. While he waited he took a shower, wrapped a towel around his waist and found himself standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom, staring into a face he almost didn't recognize.

He felt so removed from the person he'd been. He used his hand to wipe the fog from the mirror. Staring into his own dark eyes, he tried to see what his Uncle Tim was talking about. He frowned. He wasn't actually wasting away, like his uncle said. He'd been a big, strong, athletic, healthy guy. And yeah, he'd lost a little weight. He'd lost his appetite after the... he shook his head. He didn't want to think about that. It'd been six months and he finally took his uncle's advice. He took a leave of absence and after leaving the company in his uncle's and grandfather's capable hands, he struck out to visit a place and see what his brother and sister had so longed to see.

They'd done the research. They'd found the place. A place that coincidentally had been in the news a lot lately; Pine Forest, Georgia. Their next move would have been to go to this Pine Forest and reestablish what had once been lost. He'd planned to take the trip with them. It would have been a wonderful time for making memories with his brother and sister and parents, who'd become involved in the project. Now, he would go alone and do what they could not.

Sighing, he hung the towel on the bathroom doorknob, pulled on some sweats, went to his bed and knelt on the carpeted floor.

"Father," he began and immediately stopped. His heart swelled, the tears came and he waited a minute to get control. "Father, I'm a broken man. That's how I feel. Broken. I'm sorry. I'm trying really hard to let go. I keep thinking that I have let go, but then the guilt comes back. It's not that I miss them, though Father, indeed I do. It's not that I don't know that I'll see them again, but I feel so empty. Which I guess means I haven't been strengthening my relationship with You. Because when I'm close to You, I don't feel empty. I don't want to feel this way. I want to feel the peace and joy I used to feel. What is wrong with me? I know better. Life seems so worthless and empty.

"Granddad says I need to spend some time in service. He says that will help me to pull out of the funk I'm in. Funny thing is, I know that. It's like I can't remember to do the most simple things. Anyway, Father, I'm going to make the deliveries to the people my grandfather asked me to see here in Memphis, and then Monday morning, I'll finish

my drive to Pine Forest. I don't know why I'm so compelled to go there now, when before I wanted to get out of it. Is this really what You Father, what You want me to do? My family seemed to feel like it is ultra important. I pray you will be with me and help me to see what I'm supposed to see and do what I'm supposed to do. I want to do Your will, so please help me to know Your will."

He remained silent for a minute or two. "Anyway Father, let me hear from You, please. Please. Please answer me like You used to. What am I doing wrong?" He drew a calming breath. "Thank You, Father for all that you've blessed me with. Thank You for the small things and the big things too. Thank You that I have the ability to take time off from work and take this trip. Keep me safe as I travel, and keep my family safe, what's left of them. Please keep them safe. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Justice rose and sat on the side of the bed. He was a twenty-seven-year old man. He was a regular guy. Loved sports. Graduated college in business. Took his place in the family owned, *Pure Foods* business, as the face of the company. He even made several commercials for the brand. He was a totally devoted believer in Jesus. His entire family was devout. His grandfather had found Jesus when he was just a boy and never departed from Him. He was a pillar of strength. He married a beautiful girl named Clara and together they taught their children and grandchildren about the realness of God, and the family was extremely happy. Justice himself had felt the Holy Spirit many times, had felt and seen the results of Jesus working in his life many times. He could not and would not deny his Lord and Savior. But he was struggling. He didn't know why he felt led to pursue what his older siblings had been working on, so he was taking a step of faith. The Lord was leading him to Pine Forest.

Tomorrow, Sunday, he would attend a local church and then make the several food deliveries his grandfather asked him to make to some families in need. He would spend another night here at the Memphis Hilton, and then first thing Monday morning, after a workout and good breakfast, he would drive the last six and a half hours to Pine Forest and see what he could see.

✝✝✝

Psalm 34:16

"The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are attentive to their cry;
but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to blot out their name from the earth.
The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles."

Chapter Six

January 11th 5:00 PM Saturday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

The game had begun sitting around the giant dining room table playing a derivative of *Truth or Dare*. As it became more outlandish it had moved to the large front lawn of the estate. The participants included Gabe and Taylor, JoJo and Raylynn, Logan and Melody, and Kaylee, Raylynn's younger sister, and Ryder the homeless kid who'd recently joined the Adam's household.

They'd gone outside because they needed room to run a race between Gabe and young Eric. Then Gabe and Eric put up their girlfriends against each other and Jordan beat out Taylor. Of course she was much taller and was a trained athlete. Still, Taylor was also a trained athlete, a martial artist and a dancer and she didn't lose by much. Logan and JoJo were then challenged and Logan lost, again not by much. Raylynn refused the challenge against Melody, for which Mel was grateful.

Ryder, feeling strong since he'd started working construction, changed up the challenge, and lifted Kaylee onto his shoulders and dared someone to race him.

Everyone took on the challenge and it was a hilarious mess as people stumbled and fell and ended up rolling around on the lush grass with their partners. Ryder and Kaylee were not boyfriend and girlfriend so they stood back and laughed at everyone.

Then the challenge changed again, to see how far they could walk on their hands. It was actually impressive. Young Eric beat out everyone, or so he thought. Then Jeffy and Cam came out to join the fun.

"Oh, I got this one," Jeffy said calmly.

Young Eric frowned at his aunt because he knew she was right.

She handed Eli to her husband. "Here, Cam, hold the baby."

Gabe laughed. "I think that's the equivalent of 'hold my beer.'"

She amazed them all and went way beyond the distance that young Eric had set. Furthermore, she did it prettily, with toes pointed and legs changing to different positions to make it interesting.

Taylor watched her aunt in admiration. "Aunt Jeffy, you are so cool. I wanna be like you."

Jeffy laughed. "You be like you, Tay."

Taylor frowned. "No, really Aunt Jeffy. I mean, I don't mean be just like you, but you do some things that I want to learn to do."

"Are you talking about some specific things?" Jeffy asked as the entire group took a break and sat in a circle on the grass to listen to the conversation.

Taylor shrugged. "You're so strong. Like, what you just did. That was awesome. AND you fought in the Challenge for, like, three years, right?"

"Yes. I mean, that's what we're trained to do, right? We're Kinos."

Taylor nodded. "Right. Exactly what I was thinking. And I'm a Kino, and I think I'd like to fight in the Challenge."

"Really?" Jeffy asked.

Taylor nodded. "I really would."

"Have you told your dad?" Jeffy asked. "Or your Granddad?"

Taylor shook her head. "No. I mean, there always seems to be so much going on, I haven't even thought about talking to anyone about it."

"You should tell Dad," young Eric said. "If you really want to do it."

"What do you think, Gabe?" Taylor asked.

"I think it would be totally cool to watch my girl kick butt."

"But what if I don't?"

"Isn't it interesting," Cam said as he bounced his son in his arms. "That immediately fear creeps in. Fear of failure. Fear of the hard work. Fear of getting hurt. One of those things always creeps in."

Jeffy nodded. "That's why doing a challenge, any challenge, helps you to grow and learn to overcome those fears."

Young Eric nodded. "That's true. The first thing I thought about when I was asked to compete was what if I'm the first Kino to ever lose a challenge. I didn't feel ready, but Granddad said he'd get me ready and I just needed to believe in myself. I trusted his opinion. So Taytay, you should tell Dad and Granddad what you're thinking and they'll let you know if you're ready to train for that, or if you need to maybe start in a few smaller tournaments. Either way, if you want to do it, they'll get you ready one way or the other. It's hard work."

"It sure is," Jordan put in. "The first time I ever watched Three train, I couldn't believe how hard it was and how strong he was to push through. I was so impressed. I mean, I *had* to marry that!"

Everyone laughed.

"I think it's so cool, I mean, The Challenge itself. What you guys have created, it's amazing," Jordan said.

"I'd like to do a Challenge too," JoJo put in.

"Yeah, me too," Logan said.

Young Eric nodded. "Well, why don't you?"

"First, it's your time, Eric. I mean, except for my Dad, who only did it that one time, every other Kino challenger has gone consecutive years."

Young Eric nodded thoughtfully. "Okay. I get that. But maybe it's time to change that. I mean, it's not set in stone, right?"

"I'm not gonna do that to you, Eric. This is your time," JoJo reiterated.

"And when is yours?" young Eric questioned.

"You could do a triple challenge," Gabe suddenly said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"What do you have in mind, Gabe?" Logan asked.

Gabe shrugged. "I dunno. I'm not quite sure what I mean. It like, just popped into

my brain."

"Your brilliant brain," Jeffy added.

Gabe smiled at her. In some ways, Jeffy Kino knew Gabe intimately. She'd read him many times. She'd been asked by Jesus to keep watch over him and Jesus used her to heal him.

"I don't know about that, but still, guys, it doesn't have to be the Kino Challenge. It could be a new event. A one-timer, maybe, or a continual event. The three brothers, Eric, JoJo and Logan, could fight three challengers. All for charity of course. Like, you'd only face one guy, but go five rounds maybe. Or, I'm not sure. But something like that."

JoJo nodded. "This sounds like fun. But there are not only three brothers. You make four, Gabe, Ryder here makes five and then there's Jake."

Ryder's eyes opened wide. "Well, I really appreciate being included in your band of brothers, but I'm not a martial artist, so, I pass."

"You could be," Logan said.

"Yeah, and I'd like to learn, but what you guys are talking about, um, it will be years before I'm ready."

Gabe nodded. "He's right, and even I'm not ready. I just barely made second degree and I'm not ready. Besides, I'm gonna be very busy, too busy, with JETT training and school to focus on anything else. "

"Yes you are," Cam interjected.

"Right," young Eric said. "And Jake isn't home and if he comes home soon, he's not gonna want to do anything except rest and make love to his wife and that's it."

They all chuckled. Jordan smiled, a warm glow on her face, because that told her where Three's mind is right now. She glanced at him and he was smiling at her, making her blush.

"But you guys," Gabe went on. "You guys are all third and fourth degrees right? You guys can train hard."

"I'm not even finished with the rehab yet," JoJo argued.

"You'll be done next month," Raylynn dared to put in.

Everyone smiled at her. JoJo looked at her sweet face, lifted her hand and kissed it, which made Gabe feel so happy. He'd been worried about JoJo after his injury. Gabe had prayed for him, and here he was, obviously happy and in love with a beautiful and sweet girl.

"So, like, let's think about this thing," young Eric said. "We could actually call it, 'A Triple Kino Challenge.'"

"More like a triple threat," Cam joked.

They all laughed and nodded.

"Oh yeah, that'd be a cool name, 'Kino Triple Threat'", Gabe said.

Kaylee looked around at the males. They were so confident. So strong. So sure of themselves. She felt honored to be alive and part of the group, because really, if not for JoJo she'd probably be dead.

"Are you guys interested in really pursuing this for real?" young Eric asked.

JoJo nodded. “It sounds fun to me and will help me to reclaim some of my manhood after being so incapacitated.”

Raylynn shook her head and scoffed. “Huh, reclaim your manhood? May I remind you that you took out a really big guy with one hand tied to your side and using just your foot when you saved Kaylee?”

Logan smacked the back of JoJo’s head. “Yeah, Joe. Don’t be dumb.”

JoJo smiled. “Okay. Easier said than done. So, are you in, Logan?”

“Sure! I mean, I have school and I’m getting ready to go into the recording studio in a few weeks. When are you guys thinkin?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” young Eric answered. “We’ll talk to Dad and Granddad. But maybe summer sometime? Or maybe end of summer?”

Logan nodded. “School ends mid-May and I’ll be out of school until August 24th. So, if it’s before August 24th, is sounds good to me.” He smiled. “One more year and I graduate, and JoJo graduates this spring. We’re good to go.”

“Well now, this is really exciting,” Jeffy said. “You young people, you are totally inspiring.”

“You are the inspiring one, Aunt Jeffy,” Logan said.

They all agreed.

Gabe looked over the group. They all were truly inspiring people and he felt honored to be included. He glanced at Ryder. “So, Ryder, I heard your story from Taylor. It’s been a rough time so far, huh?”

Ryder nodded. “It’s been a little hard. But right now, I’m blessed. I have a place to live and a good job, and I’m learning all about building houses, every aspect. Eventually I’ll learn about commercial building. I feel really blessed, and I say blessed instead of lucky, because I’m also learning about God, thanks to these guys and their parents and all of you and your online ministry, Gabe. So yeah, right now, life is good.”

Gabe nodded. “That is awesome. I’m lovin’ it. And so like, are you and Kaylee a thing?”

Kaylee laughed and Ryder smiled. “We dated a few times, but we realized we feel more like brother and sister than we do boyfriend and girlfriend. And that’s cool. We can team up for now. I’ll watch out for her. She watches out for me too. It’s cool.”

“So, what about your real sister? You have like a baby sister, right?”

Ryder nodded. “I have a little sister, but I don’t know where she is. My mom took her and left when I was ten. But I also have two half sisters and I’m pretty worried about them.”

“Why?”

“Well, when Mr. Adams looked into my history, he said he found four domestic violence reports against my father, two of them though, were after I ran away. That means he’s either picking on my step-mother or on my little half sisters. Mr. Adams said he was gonna arrange for some surveillance to see if they can catch my father in action and rescue my step-mother and sisters. So far, they don’t have anything because they don’t have cameras inside the house, but they do know when my father goes to work and I’m thinking about stopping by and ask my step-mom about what’s really

goin' on, and then let her know she's not alone and ask her if she'll let them put cameras inside the home."

"Well, if Uncle Joey or Uncle Mark are working on it," Taylor said. "They won't stop until they're safe."

Ryder nodded. "Thanks for that. I hope not. Even though I know AMT costs a lot of money."

"Don't worry about that," Jeffy said. "Really and truly. That's not an issue."

Ryder sighed. "Thanks. Anyway, I want to make sure they're safe and I wanna get my life put back together. And thanks to JoJo going the extra mile, I'm gonna have that chance. He saved my life and I'm grateful."

Gabe smiled. "Well, ya know, that JoJo is an awesome guy."

"Yes he is."

"Uh, guys, I'm sitting right here."

They laughed.

"Well at least they were saying good stuff," Raylynn said softly.

They all looked up when the front door opened and five little kids, still in their martial arts uniforms, came running down the steps and out across the lawn. "Gabe, Gabe," they chanted.

Gabe stood and held his arms out, laughing as they ran at him and pushed him to the ground and jumped all over him.

Once the wrestling match was over, Gabe grinned at the five tiny Kinos, all a little over two and a half years old. "Hey guys!" Gabe said cheerfully.

"We missed you, Gabe," Angelina said sweetly.

He picked her up and kissed her cheek. "I missed you too, sweetie."

Taylor watched with pleasure. Her guy, she thought, he's gonna be such a good father.

Nate went to young Eric and tugged on his hand. "Daddy said we can ask you to play games with us."

"Okay," young Eric said. "Ask."

Melody smiled. All of the men in this family had an innate way of always teaching or pushing others to try hard and do their best. They made them work at whatever they were trying to do. Even in something as simple as asking someone to play with them.

Nate frowned and looked around the large group. "Will you all play a game with us?"

"What would you like to play?" JoJo asked.

"Something fun," Manny put in quickly.

"Did you guys just have a martial arts lesson?" Logan asked.

"Yes and it was awesome," Noah said in his little voice.

"Yeah, we did forms and they were fun," Nate agreed.

"Did you do the real form or the silly forms?" young Eric asked.

"We did the weal one," Abe said.

Young Eric nodded. "Okay, I'll tell you what, you guys show us your forms and if you try really hard, then we'll play 'Silly Forms' for a while.

Cam nodded. “You guys go ahead and play. Jeffy and Eli and I are gonna go help with dinner. “You all have about half and hour. Play fast.”

“Yes sir,” Gabe quipped.

Cam chuckled. He was now Gabe’s superior at Ameritech and Gabe was showing his respect. To Cam though, Gabe was far superior, he just didn’t realize it yet. Cam was highly trained, the first JETT, and he was like a super hero. But to him, Gabe’s spirituality mixed with all of his other talents made him one of the most amazing human beings Cam had ever met.

The kids lined up to do their forms. They put Abraham and Angelina in the front row because they knew it the best. When they finished they were applauded and praised. Then it was time to do the silly forms. Young Eric began and did exactly what the game projected; a silly form. His had a handstand in it where he kept wobbling over, almost falling down and then straightening back up. The move actually required some good skills.

Each kid took a turn interspersed by each young adult. They each got sillier and sillier. Finally everyone had gone except for Raylynn and Kaylee. They were whispering back and forth to each other.

“So, Ray, are you and Kaylee making plans for your forms?”

Raylynn nodded. “Well, we’re not skilled enough to do a silly form, but we were thinking we’d could do a bit from one of our Indian warrior dances that we had to do in school when we were younger. Of course, we did it to the beat of a drum so it might seem a bit weird, but...”

“We can drum for you on our thighs,” JoJo said. “Everyone sit down like this and follow the beat.”

They all began to follow JoJo’s lead. “How’s this?” he asked the girls.

Kaylee nodded. “That’s pretty good there JoJo. I heard you were a drummer. I didn’t believe it.”

They all laughed.

Raylynn and Kaylee went out in front of the group, started bending their knees in time with the beat and then went into their dance. Stepping, and going into deep squats, then looking up with a make believe shield above their heads, then turning halfway, and headed back the other way. The dance was pretty intricate. One of the last movements was to throw an invisible spear toward the intended target and jump way up in victory and then ending on their knees to give thanks. When they finally came to that last step the drumming stopped and there was silence for a minute.

“Wow,” JoJo said softly.

They broke into wild applause and then gave a standing ovation.

Raylynn and Kaylee grinned at each other and hugged each other.

“That was awesome you guys,” Taylor gushed. “I mean, it really was!”

Everyone agreed.

Cam stepped out on the porch and waved them in and they all began moving toward the door.

JoJo grabbed Raylynn’s hand and pulled her close as they walked. “Ray, that was

such a beautiful dance."

She smiled. "I'm glad you liked it. It was a dance Kay and I and several of our classmates did in middle school. I'm surprised we remembered the whole thing. Of course, this was a choreographed dance for kids. The real warrior's dance is much different."

"I'd like to see that sometime."

She nodded. "I can make that happen."

"You don't mind sharing your culture with me, right?"

"No, of course I don't mind. As long as you still think of me as a real person. I mean, you and I, we come from different backgrounds, different races, but I just want you to think of me as me. As your..." She stopped because she wasn't sure what to say.

"As what? As my girl?"

She nodded.

"Oh, baby, you are definitely my girl. And I have to admit one thing."

"What?"

"You doing that dance, Ray, it wasn't just beautiful. It was hot."

Raylynn giggled.

✝✝✝

January 11th 10:00 PM Saturday Evening

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Gabe pressed Taylor against her bedroom door at the end of the hall and kissed her goodnight. He smiled into her beautiful grayish eyes. "Goodnight, Tay," he said softly. "It's been an awesome time spending my day with you."

She nodded. "Being beside you is always a good time." She leaned forward and rested her head on his chest and sighed.

He held her in silence. They didn't have to say the same words again that they'd been saying for months. Words like, 'I hate saying goodnight to you. I hate saying goodbye to you. I wish we could be together always. I can't stand being away from you.' Finally she looked up.

"I can't wait for you to see the church tomorrow, and meet Reverend Clark, and all the people. Most of them follow you on social media."

Gabe smiled. "Well, if they follow me, then they follow you. We're a team. Gabe and Taylor, an unbreakable team."

Taylor sighed. "Are you nervous about your training?"

He shook his head. "I'm ready. Ready to do this and get through it and move forward." He yawned.

"Poor Gabe. You've been up for a long time."

He shrugged. "I slept on the flight. I'm okay."

"I might sneak in to see you tonight," she said slyly.

He smiled. "If you do, I won't turn you away."

She giggled. "I love you, Gabe Tanner."

"Me too," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I mean, I love you too." He kissed her one more time, opened her door, shoved her inside and closed the door.

At the same time, Young Eric came out of Jordan's room, which was right next to Taylor's. He nodded at Gabe. "Gabe, it's been great to see you today. Lookin' forward to your new endeavors?"

Gabe nodded. "I am. I'm eager to get started."

"It's gonna be hard. I've talked to new agents who were training over the years, and they say it's the hardest thing they've ever done. And now, Cam says it's even harder."

"Good. I want it to be hard. I like the challenge. It motivates me."

Eric chuckled. "Of course it does. That's one of the reasons you're my brother. You get it. Anyway, so, I'm tired. You gotta be tired. What time did you get up this morning to catch your flight?"

"Up by four, at the airport by five. Takeoff was at six."

"Wow. So, it's one in the morning for you."

Gabe shrugged. "I slept almost four hours on the flight."

"Still, your body needs to rest for what's coming, so get some sleep."

"Yes sir, Daddy," Gabe quipped.

Young Eric grinned. "'Night, bro."

"Good night."

Eric started across the hall and opened his own bedroom door, but turned back. "Oh, and Gabe, just a heads up, I'm pretty sure they're gonna take advantage of you being at church tomorrow and ask you to come up and say a few words."

Gabe nodded. "Thanks. I guess if that happens, then I'll let the Holy Spirit guide my tongue."

Young Eric sighed. "Again, bro, you are so cool."

Gabe chuckled. "If you say that because I said I'd let the Holy Spirit guide me then, that's not being cool. I say that because I'm smart enough to know that my own words will not be sufficient and my only way out is to step back and let the Spirit talk."

Eric shook his head. "You idiot, that is what's totally cool, in my book anyway. And your humility. Aww, Gabriel Tanner, you're a bright light." He reached out and smacked his cheek, none too gently. "Goodnight Gabe."

✞✞✞

January 12th 8:50 AM Sunday Morning

Hopewood Chapel Church of Christ, Huntington Beach, California

Gabe and Taylor stood out in front of the church looking up at the beautiful stained glass windows.

"Wow, Tay, the pictures don't do this justice. This is really amazing. And Aunt Breez did this?"

"Yes. Isn't she awesome?"

"She is. I'm trying to remember the pic of how it looked with the plywood up there. The difference is like, spectacular."

"I know. I love it. What do you think about the church itself? I mean, isn't it just so cute?"

He smiled at her. "Cute. Yep. It's really cute. Like you."

JoJo and Logan joined them on the walk in front of the church.

"Well, Gabester," JoJo said. "Come on in and let us introduce you to the Rev and to Pastor Pat."

Gabe nodded.

Logan touched his shoulder. "And I'm gonna work with the choir for thirty minutes. Join in if you feel like it."

Gabe smiled. "Whatcha gonna sing today?"

"The choir is gonna sing two songs you probably know. '*What a Beautiful Name*' and '*Chain Breaker*.'"

Gabe's eyes lit up. "Oh cool. Those are two of my favs."

Logan smiled. "I know."

Taylor giggled.

Gabe put his arm around her. "You guys are very thoughtful."

"Yep," Logan said with a grin. "So we hope you'll join us."

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday?"

Logan chuckled. "It's always fun to see how you'll handle things."

Gabe laughed.

They headed up the steps and went inside and went straight to Ronny's office, while Taylor headed straight to the chapel where the choir was assembling, because she wanted to find Mika and Melody.

"Reverend Clark," JoJo said. "This is the guy we think of as our brother, Gabe Tanner."

Ronny smiled warmly and took Gabe's hand. "Ah yes, young man. I have now watched many videos of you. I've seen video of your fighting matches. Video of your abduction experience. Videos of your baseball games and many videos of your daily mini-sermons, which are very good. It's a pleasure and an honor to finally get to meet you in person."

Gabe blinked up at the man. "Sir, it's an honor to meet you as well. I know your story. I know that you are called like Grandmaster Kino was called and that makes you very special. One of only twelve. That is incredible."

Ronny sighed. "That's right. You're the one who called that day with the number twelve. Well, thank you, young man. I'm afraid I haven't accomplished near what Eric has accomplished and I'm twenty-two years his senior."

Gabe frowned. "Well, sir, it's not a competition, is it? We work with what God gives us to work with, right? Parable of the talents?"

Ronny's eyes teared up. "Well now, you are truly very inspiring."

JoJo and Logan grinned at each other.

Pastor Patrick Barnes approached and was introduced.

"Young man," Pastor Pat began. "You are doing amazing work. All of my youth group up north, they follow you, they love you and several of them say that they want to be like you."

Gabe's eyes opened wide. "Oh! Well, thank you, Pastor Pat, but they shouldn't try to be like me, cuz, like, I make a lot of mistakes. Grandmaster Kino says we should try

to be like Jesus."

"Yes, and that's true, however, you are alive, you are young and a contemporary, and you make it easy for them to see how to do that. You make it personal for them. They see you be Christlike, and they think, hmm, I can do that too. So, thank *you* for your faithfulness."

Gabe nodded humbly. "Thank you, sir."

"Well," Logan said. "Gabe's gonna come join us for a quick choir practice. See you soon. Come on, Gabe. I don't like to be late."

They headed for the chapel. When they walked in the entire group applauded. Logan leaned close to Gabe. "I'm afraid they're a bit starstruck. Go with it."

Gabe laughed. "That's all I can do. But I mean, you and young Eric are the real stars here. Aren't they starstruck by you?"

"I think they were at first. Now, we're old hat."

Gabe rolled his eyes.

"Hey everyone," Logan said loudly.

They all quieted. "I guess you all know who this is. This is my brother from another mother...and father... Gabe Tanner. We don't have time now, but sometime today, introduce yourself. Today, he's consented to sing with us, so let's get started."

Gabe joined the ranks next to the tenors and worked quickly to learn the arrangement and the words... though in truth, he knew most of those. They put it all together in the thirty minutes allotted.

The chapel filled up, the congregation rose and the music began.

When Mika sang her solo in the beginning of 'What a Beautiful Name' it blew him away. She was amazing.

It ended up that there was a solo reserved for him in 'Chain Breaker'. He sang it brilliantly. "If you believe it, if you receive it, if you can feel it, somebody testify..."

The congregation was on their feet.

Taylor, squeezed her mother's hand as she glanced over at Gabe. He was beautiful in her eyes. Obviously filled with the Spirit. Standing strong and tall wearing a blue suit that brought out the blue in his eyes. He was jumping up and down, raising his hand in the air. Oh how she loved him. When the singing and the sermons were over, Ronny called upon Gabe to come up and give his testimony.

The place exploded in applause and cheers. Gabe came to the lectern and looked out at the congregation, catching the eyes of several of the older crowd. Finally, he smiled warmly.

"Hey everyone," he said in his southern accent.

He took a moment, closed his eyes for a few seconds and opened them again with a smile. "Thank you so much for being so welcoming. I hope you're this welcoming to everyone who comes through those doors. I know, because Taylor told me, that this church has been through a lot. Good times and bad times. I know Reverend Clark told you to invite the young people." He gestured out across the congregation. "Well, I see a whole lotta young people here, and it makes me feel so happy to feel the energy you all are putting into invoking the Holy Spirit into your meeting. You people are awesome

and the work you're doing here is amazing. I can feel the Spirit so strong." He pulled out his phone. "Sorry, but I don't have my Bible with me this morning."

He hit a few buttons. "In Galatians 5:22, it says, 'When we have the Holy Ghost, we feel love, joy, and peace.' I know that's right," he said in a strong southern drawl, making the congregation laugh. "And that's what I feel here today and I love it so much. Do you feel it? That pulling, that yearning in your heart that makes you happy and almost desperate at the same time?"

"Amen," someone shouted and a few others joined in.

"That Spirit," Gabe went on. "That spirit is what changes people. That Spirit is what tells people that come to visit here that, hey, this Jesus thing, it feels real. It feels right. It is true. I want more of this feeling."

He smiled. "I always say when I feel the Spirit so strong, that it's addictive. If ya gotta be addicted to something, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus sent to be with us in His absence, it's a good addiction. How do we get more? That's kind of what I talk about each day on my webcast. We get more by trying to live as holy as we can. Jesus saves us through grace but He also said, 'Go and sin no more,' and 'If you love me, keep my commandments.' So, live as good as you can. Be honest. Never lie. Be slow to anger. Stay calm. Don't be jealous. Be happy for other's successes. Even like, if your team lost the game. Don't cheat. Be noble. Help others. Serve others. Don't complain. And when things get hard, pick up that cross and carry it with a happy expression on your face, because you should be happy to carry your burden.

"It's not much to do but at times it sure can be difficult. Hard times are called hard times for a reason. But those hard times make us strong. They turn us into warriors. That's what I try to be. A warrior for truth. A warrior for Jesus. A warrior to serve God in any and all things and I love God with my whole self. I'm grateful that Jesus came to this earth and died for me. For little nothing me. I'm so grateful," Gabe stopped because his voice filled with emotion. He cleared his throat and went on.

"Last year was a hard year. Who knows, I might think it was nothing compared to what's coming this year. So, I'd better not complain and cry 'woe is me' and just use it to get strong and get ready for whatever else the Lord has in store for me. That's what I'm trying to do. As always, if any of you need help with anything, myself, Taylor, all the counselors on my site and here, at this church, Reverend Clark and Pastor Pat and JoJo Adams and Logan Adams we are here to help you. Reach out. We love you. Our love for Jesus makes our hearts swell with love for each of you. Don't give up and don't give in. Surrender only to Jesus. I pray He will send His angels to watch over you, lead you and guide you, heal you, comfort you and give you clarity of mind. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," the congregation said loudly.

JoJo stood and prayed over the congregation, Mrs. Byre played the organ and the congregation began to disperse.

Bree stood immediately. "I'm gonna go to the lady's room. I'll join you guys out front."

"You okay, babe?" Ricky asked.

"Just a little nausea. I'm fine. Don't worry."

Ricky nodded. "We'll go on and wait outside."

Gabe grabbed Taylor's hand. "Stay close."

Taylor smiled and nodded.

Just as he thought, they were inundated. Even before they could walk down the few steps from the sanctuary they were stopped several times. Some just wanted to shake Gabe's hand and tell him they enjoyed his talk. Other's had questions or personal stories they wanted his opinion on. He never let go of Taylor's hand and involved her in the answers when he could by asking her opinion or asking her if she agreed with him.

It took several minutes to walk up the aisle of the church. They gave each person that approached the royal treatment. They focused on them, they smiled and shook hands lovingly. They understood that God was placing these people in front of them and was trusting them to minister to them in some way.

Taylor understood that they mostly wanted to speak with her guy. She couldn't blame them. She was as drawn to him as everyone else. Everyone always said he was a bright light, and indeed he was. She knew he was purposely making sure that she was involved in speaking to these people and her heart swelled with love for him.

"Well," Gabe said to a teenage boy who'd asked him how he doesn't let all the negativity in the world get to him. "I mean, honestly, sometimes it does get to me. The thing is to be mindful of what you're thinking or feeling and when I realize I'm feeling down, what do I do, Taylor?"

She smiled. "I've seen him do it many times. He takes a step back, closes his eyes and says a quick prayer. Like, Father be with me, or Father help me to understand this situation and how I can help. I will do whatever you prompt me to do. Your will be done. Use me– stuff like that."

Gabe smiled and nodded. "She knows me so well and she does because she does the same kind of things. So really, the answer is, pray often. Actually more like, pray always. He's real. He hears every word you say. Ask God to help you to let go of the things you can't change. The negativity in the world is bigger than we are. We have to let go and let God."

They kept moving forward and finally made it out the front doors of the church where they were stopped again. They started down the long concrete steps and only got a few steps down when a group of girls stopped him and wanted his autograph. As he signed his name and chatted, Taylor noticed Tamika walk by heading down the stairs. Taylor really wanted to check in with her and make sure she gets home safely. She watched her get to the bottom of the steps and turn left.

"Gabe," Taylor whispered quickly. "I'm gonna catch Mika. I want to introduce you to her. I'll be right back."

"Where is she?"

Taylor pointed. "She's right there."

Gabe nodded. "Okay. I'll catch up to you."

Taylor skipped down the steps. "Mika! Wait up!"

Mika turned and smiled at Taylor.

"Why did you just walk on past without even saying goodbye?"

Mika shrugged. "You and your boy were all busy. I didn't wanna interrupt."

"Silly. I want you to interrupt. Always. I wanted you to meet Gabe. He's trying to get away from those girls. He told me earlier that he wants to meet you. Will you wait?"

"Sure."

They walked slowly down the crowded sidewalk, stopping where the sidewalk ends at the drive that leads into the apartments. There were a lot of people milling around, chatting, kids running up and down the walkway, people coming up to Mika and patting her on the back for her solo.

"So, what did ya think about Gabe's little talk?" Taylor asked.

Mika smiled. "Oh girl, it was good. He's good. He's hot."

Taylor giggled. "Yeah he is. I've missed him so much."

"But he's here now, right?"

"Yes, but I'm not gonna get to see him very much. He's training to be a JETT, which is an Ameritech Agent Special Ops kinda thing, aaannd he's goin' to online school at USC. He only gets Sunday's off and some evenings."

"Well, when he was in Georgia you didn't see him at all, right? So this is better than that."

Taylor nodded. "Yes, it is." She looked across the driveway. "Hey, is that your mom?"

Mika nodded. "Yes."

"Did she come to church today?"

"Yes she did. She wanted to hear me sing."

"Oh, Mika, that is wonderful!"

Mika smiled. "Yeah, life is actually kind of becoming a pleasure. I've learned that having Jesus in your life, makes everything so much better."

Meanwhile, Gabe finished signing autographs and glanced down to make sure he could see Taylor. He took one more step down but was met by two boys.

"Hey, Gabe. We uh, we just started goin' to church here. And like, we live pretty far away but we got a ride and came today to see you cuz we heard you was gonna be here. And like, our dad, he's really sick. He's dying. We heard them say he's dying. And we was hoping you would pray for him."

Gabe looked down at Taylor again, then back at the boys. "Of course I'll pray for him. As a matter of fact, let's pray right now."

He put his arms around the two young boys who were about twelve years old, closed his eyes and began to pray with them and for them and their father and their whole family.

Down on the sidewalk, Taylor looked across the drive over at Mrs. Burton chatting with Agent Thomas. "Has Agent Thomas been watching over you?"

Mika nodded. "Yep. Well, I mean, not all the time. He's like, running security for the apartments now. He says the security gates will be finished this week and he'll be the one in charge to make sure the shifts are filled 24/7 for awhile, until things calm

down. So, I feel safe."

"Cool."

"Yeah, not so cool."

Both Taylor and Mika turned at the voice. It was Anthony, the one called T.

Mika frowned. "You just sayin' that because that means you can't get away with tryin' to run the place and tellin' people what to do."

He moved close to her. "You better watch the way you talk to me. I still got Teo's back and you gonna get yours for puttin' him in jail."

"Is that a threat?" Mika asked, her brows raised.

"It sho is."

"Teo put himself in jail," Taylor put in quickly. "And you'd better watch who you're threatening."

T glared at her. "You ain't special, little girl. You think you big and bad? You so about to get yours."

Taylor laughed. "Oh, really?"

"Yep." He grabbed her arm like he was going to take her somewhere.

"Let me go," Taylor said loudly.

"Naw. You goin' with me and T-bone."

"Let her go!" Mika screamed.

Taylor acted quickly. "Gabe!" she yelled as she punched T in the throat, turned and threw him over her hip and onto the sidewalk.

Gabe heard the commotion and opened his eyes in time to see his girl kick butt. He took off down the steps. Agent Thomas took off toward the girls. Gabe had his eyes on the scene as he ran toward it.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion. He saw Taylor kick the boy lying on the sidewalk. He saw Agent Thomas start across the driveway. He heard a loud roar of an engine and saw a black Corvette come screeching toward the driveway. The car slammed into Agent Thomas who was knocked high into the air and landed on the pavement in front of the car. He saw a large man jump from the car, grab Taylor by her right wrist, jerk her forward and start pulling her toward his car. When she pulled back, he lifted his big fist and punched right toward her face.

Gabe knew this was it. This was the moment that he'd seen in his vision. He was almost there. He let go a vicious keyai as he went airborne and slammed his feet into the man's chest. The punch to Taylor's face and Gabe's kick to the man's chest seemed to happen simultaneously. Taylor fell to the pavement, her head snapping back onto the pavement as she landed. The man also fell to the pavement, his head also snapping back to crack on the driveway.

Gabe pulled his weapon when the man started to get back up. "Stay down or I will put a bullet in your freakin' head," he yelled loudly, convincing T-Bone that he was extremely serious about it.

Cam and Jeffy arrived. Jeffy went straight to Taylor. Cam headed to help Gabe. Joey, Mark and Ricky arrived. Ricky also went straight to Taylor. Joey and Mark and Jensen went to render aid to Agent Thomas.

Leaving the bad guy in Cam's capable hands, Gabe holstered his weapon and made his way to Taylor's side. Jeffy patted his thigh as he knelt beside her. "She's gonna be okay," she said quickly.

Gabe nodded, closing his eyes briefly in gratitude. He opened his eyes and looked her over. Her face was bloody and there was more blood on the pavement beneath her head. "There's blood."

Jeffy nodded. "She hit her head on the pavement, but it's just a small cut. She's concussed. The blood on her face is because he bloodied her nose. But you got there just in time. You landed your kick just at the moment of impact and it drew the momentum away from his punch."

Gabe's eyes teared up. "I let her get too far away from me."

Jeffy nodded. "We'll talk about this later. I have to see to Agent Thomas."

As she did, more agents began to arrive. Police arrived. Ambulances arrived. A group of parishioners prayed together on the steps. Gabe stayed with Taylor. Ricky was on her other side. They looked at each other. "You did well," Ricky assured him.

Gabe took Taylor's hand. "Tay, can you hear me?"

She moaned. "Where's Mika? Is she okay?"

Gabe looked across to see Mika standing nearby. She was crying. "She's right here, baby."

Mika leaned over. "I'm okay, Taylor. Are you okay?"

"I think so. My head hurts. Can I sit up?"

Gabe and Ricky gently helped her to sit up.

"How ya feelin' baby girl," Ricky said softly.

"I'm okay. I'm not even sure what happened."

"Me neither," Ricky said. They both looked to Gabe.

"Well, from what I saw," Gabe began, "it looked like this guy," he said pointing to the younger kid who was being detained by agents, was trying to get you over to that guy. I think it was an attempted kidnapping."

Taylor looked around. "Well, that guy is T, his name is Anthony Brown. He's a troublemaker and Ameritech has him under surveillance. That guy over there is a bad guy, like drug dealer type guy named T-bone. I don't know his real name, but I know that he's the one who smacked 'Mari around all the time and was stayin' with Mari's mom."

"He's the one I sent to jail not long ago," Ricky added. "We'll put it all together with Joey and Jeff. Looks like this was a revenge thing maybe, for Taylor trying to help Mika, which unfortunately means, Teo probably had something to do with it."

"Teo and T and T-bone are close. They always working together," Mika said. "I'm so sorry Taylor. I had no idea they would do something like this."

Taylor smiled up at her. "It's okay, Mika. I mean, I think this was actually supposed to happen. This helps to out these bad guys, right? And now that we know about the bad, like corrupt guys in the police department, right? So that means that these guys will go down for a long time, and that means that finally, you and your mom will be safe and your new Jesus life really is gonna be so awesome! I think God is

working here."

Ricky and Gabe smiled. Their sweet, innocent, beautiful Taylor was getting stronger and stronger.

✝✝✝

January 12th 7:30 PM Sunday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Almost the entire west coast family had come to the special dinner at the 'grand's house.' Both Kino households, both Lee households, both Adam's households, the Davises, the Brooks, the Keiths, the Wallaces of course, since they lived there, the Deals, and the Quinns.

The after church melee didn't put a damper on their day at all. Both Anthony and T-bone were arrested and this time, it will stick. Agent Thomas seemed to be unhurt, but was taken to the hospital to make sure there were no internal injuries. He joked that his mother had always said that there wasn't much that could take him down. He'd survived two fatal car crashes, one as a kid and one as an adult, a one-sided gang fight beat down, two mudslides and an avalanche just last year on a ski trip.

Tori Burton, Mika's mom, decided that they would accompany the man to the hospital and make sure he gets home okay and make sure he has a good meal. She said it was the least they could do since he had been so good about protecting her and her daughter. Taylor got the feeling that Mrs. Burton was a little bit sweet on Agent Thomas and thought that was very cool. He was a good man and pretty cute for an older guy. Mrs. Burton was also pretty cute. Taylor liked the idea.

Dinner had been delicious and also entertaining as Gabe caught up on what everyone was doing and heard stories about when Melody had been attacked by both Banoy Cruz and her ex-boyfriend Cade Kessler. After dinner he went out on the front lawn and played with Josie and her new dog that she'd been given for Christmas. That led to all of the children playing crazy games with Gabe and Taylor, though Taylor mostly sat and watched because she wasn't feeling great.

There were a whole lotta kids out on the lawn. Gabe and Taylor, Josie and Jamie Brooks, Amari and Brittney Meeks, Emily Adams, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger Adams, and Angelina, Abe, Noah, Nate and Manny Kino. Also outside with them were the older "kids;" young Eric and Jordan, JoJo and Raylynn, Logan and Melody, Ryder and Kaylee, Brook Tattersall, Daniel and Jeremy Davis and Phillip and Lyle Keith.

The older ones did their best to make sure all of the kids were getting involved and the dog, whom Josie named Coco, was running around barking and playing and making everyone laugh.

As Taylor and Brook spoke about how much Brook loves living with the Davises, and about what happened after church today, they glanced over at the sound of a car coming up the drive.

At almost the same time, both Brook and Ryder received a text asking them to come into the house.

Ryder stopped playing and pulled out his phone to read the text. "Hey guys, I'm being summoned. I gotta go in."

"What's goin' down?" JoJo asked.

"Not sure. Guess I'll go find out."

Brook looked up at Taylor. "Miss Davis wants me to come in."

"Does she say why?" Taylor asked.

"No. But I hope it's not because they're gonna try to make me go back and live with my mother."

"You want me to come with you?"

"No. That's okay. I'll talk to you later."

Brook rose and started toward the house and realized Ryder was doing the same thing."

"You get summoned too?" Ryder asked.

Brook nodded. "Yeah. And someone just drove up to the house. I hope it's not CPS telling me I can't stay with the Davises."

Ryder smiled reassuringly. "Well, they wouldn't want me around to tell you that, so let's not jump to conclusions."

Ryder escorted her up the steps and inside. He took note of the vehicle. It looked like an Ameritech SUV.

They walked in and Angel Lee smiled. "Hey kiddos," she said in her sweet southern accent.

Ryder nodded. "Hey, Mrs. Lee. Is everything okay?"

"Oh yes, or it will be. We called you in for reinforcements for your friend, Zoe Marchant."

"Zoe? Is she here?" Brook asked.

"Yes she is," Angel confirmed. "She's in a meeting right now with Grandmaster Kino and the Davises."

"Why? What happened?" Brook asked.

"Come sit down, sweetie."

The three took a seat in the living room where several others were sitting and chatting. Ryder looked around. Mark and Joey Adams were present, along with their wives, and Justin and Jason Lee were present along with their wives. Jeffy and Cam and Jensen and Kim. Also Grandmaster Kino's wife Shelley, They all greeted the kids.

"So," Angel began, "you both know that Zoe was placed last week into a new foster home. It looked promising. There was no father in the home but the mother seemed to be a good, strong, woman. She had two kids of her own and an extra bedroom and wanted to invite a foster child into that room. One of her children is a sixteen year old girl, and we all thought that would be great for Zoe. However, from what Zoe says, the past week has been a nightmare for her instead."

Brook and Ryder shook their heads. Poor Zoe was always ending up in the thick of things.

Angel went on. "Zoe said the air in the home was thick with tension. She got the feeling that the sixteen year old daughter whom I won't name, was not happy that her mother invited another girl her age into the family. Zoe says that the girl made it obvious that she didn't want Zoe around. Things culminated last night. I actually

haven't yet heard Zoe's side of the story from last night. But what the mother says is not good.

"How the mother tells it is her daughter had two friends over to spend the night last night and they kindly invited Zoe to join them. They were in the daughter's bedroom doing their makeup, trying new techniques off of Instagram reels. Zoe didn't have much makeup of her own, only what Desi bought for her, so the girls offered to let her use some of theirs. They said that Zoe broke someone's expensive lipstick and didn't seem to be sorry at all and when they called her out on it, she got mad."

"Who got mad? Zoe?" Brook asked.

"Yes."

Ryder shook his head. "Naw, that's crazy. I mean, Zoe is the most even-keeled girl I've ever met."

Angel nodded. "They said she took the broken lipstick and rubbed it all over her own face and then all over the other girls' faces and clothes and then started breaking up a case filled with eye shadow and rubbing it all over them and the room and then knocked everything off the dresser including an expensive lamp and a jewelry box. And then, when they all tried to restrain her, Zoe punched the daughter in the face and blacked her eye and bloodied her nose and then Zoe attacked the mom."

Brook shook her head. "No, Miss Angel, she wouldn't do that. Really. I know Zoe, you have to believe me."

Angel nodded. "Oh, I believe you, sweetie."

"So, how did it end?" Ryder asked.

"The mother called the police and had her arrested. She spent last night in jail. I was finally notified and Jason and Justin were able to arranged her release an hour ago."

"Poor Zoe," Brook mumbled.

"What's gonna happen to her now?" Ryder asked.

Angel smiled. "Well, the Davises heard what happened and immediately thought that you Brook, might like having Zoe as your foster sister."

"Really? Oh, that would be so awesome!"

Angel nodded. "I'm glad you think that. They are in Eric's office right now talking about what actually happened and making sure Zoe being with you won't be a problem for you. That's why they called you up here. They're gonna invite you into the office in a few minutes to ask how you feel about all of this."

"What does it matter how I feel?"

Angel smiled. "Because you matter, Brook. You're important too."

"Well, I feel wonderful if Zoe gets to live with me at the Davises."

Angel nodded. "Good. I'm glad to hear it. Eric will talk about it to you a little more in depth and then we'll see what happens."

"And so, why did you call *me* up here?" Ryder asked.

"For moral support for both girls. They look up to you, Ryder. You were their protector on the street. That's hard to let go of, ya know?"

He nodded. "I'm happy to fill that role for them," he said as he glanced up at Mark

Adams, the man who was now his foster father and for whom Ryder had the utmost respect. Mark Adams smiled and nodded at him, making Ryder feel secure and safe. Ryder thought if he ever got married, he hoped he could be a calm, safe, good man like Mr. Adams. Really, like all the men in this family.

They all looked up as Grandmaster Kino came into the room. He smiled warmly, as usual. "Hello everyone." He smiled at Brook. "Brook, will you join us in my study?"

She rose. "Yes sir."

Grandmaster Kino glanced at Ryder. "Ryder, thanks for being here. Both Zoe and Brook say they feel like you're part of their real family and they feel secure when you're around."

"Happy to help," Ryder said, somewhat uncomfortably.

Mark Adams watched and smiled. Ryder Bell was a fine young man.

It only took a few minutes for Brook to meet with the Davises and Zoe in Eric's study. He simply wanted to observe their interaction first, and then ask a few questions and be sure that Brook wouldn't feel pushed aside or put out by having Zoe move in with the Davises. The family had informed Eric that they think they'd found a home that they wanted to buy and if Zoe and Brook wanted, they could have their own rooms or, they could still room together. It was up to them. They prayed together and adjourned their meeting and joined the others in the living room.

Ryder immediately went to Zoe and looked her over and hugged her.

She hadn't been able to shower yet and she still had remnants of lipstick and eyeshadow all over her arms and clothing and under her chin. Her face had been wiped clean, but there was a scratch on one cheek and a bruise on the other cheek.

"How ya doin' Zo?"

She sighed. "Been better. But I'm about to be good."

"I heard you're moving in the with Brook. I think that's great."

"Me too, and I'm really thankful for the Davises being so kind."

"They are some of the best people," he said.

"Well, if everyone will sit down, Zoe wants to give us her side of the story so let's hear what really happened," Angel said.

Shelley nodded. "Melody and the others are going to keep the kids outside so we won't be interrupted."

"Thanks, honey," Eric said as he bent down and kissed her cheek from behind the sofa where he stood.

Some of the men brought in chairs from the dining room. Zoe was invited to sit on a sofa between Brook and Ryder.

Eric nodded. "Go ahead, Zoe and tell what happened."

Zoe nodded. "Well, uh, first I just wanna say thanks for like, allowing me to tell you what happened. I hope you'll believe me. Mrs. Alder didn't believe me, but I swear I'm not lying. I mean, not that I haven't ever lied. I sure have. But I'm not lying about this."

"We got you, Zoe," Ryder said.

"Rest assured Zoe," Eric began. "We'll believe your story. Jeffy has already told

us that what Mrs. Alder said happened is not what happened."

Zoe nodded. "Well, to be fair, Mrs. Alder only knows what Kenna and the other two told her."

"Go ahead, sweetie," Angel encouraged.

"So, like, I knew the minute I got there and was introduced to Kenna that she didn't want me there. She was mad at her mom for taking in a foster kid who was her same age. She told me that later when we were alone. I didn't know what to say about that so I told her take it up with her mom or with CPS. I sure didn't want to be there either if they didn't want me there. But you know, it was the same old story. Mrs. Alder needed the money they would give her for fostering a kid." Zoe stopped and made a face and took a deep breath.

"So anyway, all week, Kenna was doing stuff to make it seem like I was causing trouble. I mean, really stupid stuff, like I was helping to clear the table and she took the plate I'd just brought into the kitchen and dropped it on the floor and yelled at me like I did it."

"Did you tell Mrs. Alder that you didn't drop it?" Brook asked.

"Yeah, I did, but she said, 'Oh honey don't be like that. You don't have to lie. It's okay. We all make mistakes." Zoe sighed. "And Kenna poured shampoo down the drain and then complained that I used half a bottle. I know she poured it down the drain because every time I'd turn on the water, bubbles came up out of the drain. It was stupid stuff like that. Then when Kenna asked her mom if she could have friends come over she told her it might be a good thing for me to get to know some of the kids from school. So, we were all in Kenna's room and they wanted to practice putting on makeup from some different Instagram reels."

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Brook, you know I'm not into all that stuff but I was trying to be friendly. I didn't have much of my own makeup. Desi bought me some, but apparently my stuff wasn't good enough. So, Janelle, one of the girls, said I just had to try this new lipstick. It doesn't rub off. It was bright red. I didn't really press it that hard against my lip, but the minute I did, it broke off and she went bonkers. She was screaming about how expensive it was and what an idiot I was and I was so stupid and didn't I even know how to put on lipstick. Before I knew what was happening, she snatched the lipstick back out of my hand, grabbed me by my hair and rubbed the lipstick all over my face and my neck and even in my hair. And of course I tried to fight back. I picked up the big piece that broke off and smashed it in Janelle's face and when Kenna grabbed my hair to pull me off of Janelle, I turned around and smashed it all over her face.

"But it was two against one and they wrestled me down and sat on me and started rubbing a whole tray of eye shadow all over me. I grabbed it out of Kenna's hand and the top broke off and I tried to rub it on her too. Janelle kicked me a bunch of times like, in the stomach and the back and the chest and I tried to get up and just leave the room but they grabbed me and slammed me against the dresser. That's how the jewelry box and the lamp got knocked down. Kenna started goin' crazy about the broken jewelry box. She screamed at me and came at me with some sharp piece of jewelry, like a pin

or something, and I slapped her before she could stab me with it, and when I slapped her she started screaming and finally Mrs. Alder came in the room screaming and Janelle pushed me into her and she thought I was trying to fight with her, but I wasn't. I swear. I just wanted to get out of there. She called the cops and told them I went crazy."

The room was silent for a moment. It was Justin who broke the silence. "Zoe, you said she had two friends over. What was the other girl doing while all this was going on?"

Zoe rolled her eyes. "She was laughing— and videoing."

They all became alert. "Videoing?" Mark said.

Jason smiled and looked at Jensen, his son-in-law who was a brilliant hacker. "Jensen, can you find their accounts and capture that video? I'm almost positive they've posted it."

Jensen nodded. "Just need their names." He glanced at Eric. "Grandmaster Kino, may I use your computer for a few minutes?"

"Have at it." He smiled. "So, do you need my password or are you able to just figure it out?"

Everyone laughed.

Jensen grinned slyly. "I could eventually figure it out, but for the sake of time, will you just give it to me?"

Eric nodded then turned to Zoe. "Zoe do you know the girls names?"

"I know Kenna Alder. The other girls are Janelle and Sam, so probably Samantha, but I don't know their last names."

Jensen nodded. "That's good enough. I'm gonna need you to ID their pictures on Kenna's accounts."

Zoe smiled. "I'd be happy to do that."

"Zoe," Shelley said softly and everyone quieted to hear what their matriarch had to say.

"Yes ma'am?"

"First, sweetie, that sounds like a hard time, but I noticed something about you. As you were telling the story, you seemed annoyed, which is understandable, but you don't seem angry, and I think that in itself says a lot about you and your strength. Earlier, before you came in here, Ryder said you were the most even-keeled person he'd ever met. I see what he means. But I also know that you've learned during your hard life, to control your emotions. I just want to say, that these hard things make us strong. You are strong. But you also are allowed to show emotion and be angry or sad or frustrated and also happy. Especially here, with your family.

"And Zoe, we ARE now your family. Every single one of us. The Davises, yes, but they don't get full claim on you. We got you sweetie. I'm now your grandmother. My husband is your grandfather. The Davises are your parents. The rest are your aunts and uncles and cousins. You belong to us now and you can rest at ease. We got you, we will back you, we will help you through every crisis, and we will even discipline you and lecture you and advise you. But you are now one of us and you don't always have to be

strong. I'm just saying, sweetie, that you can let your guard down and rest."

Zoe's eyes immediately filled and Brook and Ryder hugged her.

Eric smiled with pride at his wife. She felt a strong need to make this child feel safe and those few words will go a long way to do just that.

✝✝✝

Psalm 10:17-18

"O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted;
you will strengthen their heart; you will incline
your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed,
so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more."

Chapter Seven

Whatever was taking place inside the house with Brook and Ryder must be over because they'd been told to bring the kids inside. Gabe watched as everyone moved inside. It was almost time for him to leave. He had to be inside his dorm by 9:00. He reached down and pulled Taylor up from where she'd been sitting on the grass, then nodded at Young Eric. "Eric, Tay and I are gonna walk around the side to that bench over there and talk a bit. I'm gonna have to leave soon."

Eric nodded. "Got it. Don't leave without sayin' goodbye to the rest of us."

Gabe smiled. "I wouldn't dream of it." He took Taylor's hand and they walked silently around to the side of the large estate where there was a little garden and a bench. They sat down and Gabe turned so he could see her. "How ya feelin' Tay?"

She sighed. "I'm okay. A little headache. A little nauseated."

"Dizzy?"

"No."

Gabe sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have let you go down there alone."

"That's silly, Gabe. I was only a few feet away from you."

"Yeah, but I should've known."

"Known what?"

"Well, I never told you this, but I had a vision a month or so ago. I saw a man's fist come at your face and hit you hard. I saw you lying on the pavement. You were dead. Your eyes were open. There was blood under your head where you'd cracked your skull. Your hair was all fanned out around you."

"Well, that is pretty scary. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to scare you and have you live in fear. I told your dad and we've been very careful to make sure you're not alone. Jeffy also had a vision, but she saw a different scenario. She saw you hit with a fist and your nose was bleeding but you were okay. You were not dead."

Taylor nodded. "So, Aunt Jeffy's vision was the correct one."

"Yes. But she had her vision after your father and I had talked about keeping you safer so she feels like our precautions would help you to not be hurt badly."

Taylor smiled. "Well, that's good."

"Then you're not mad?"

She shook her head. "No, I think you called it right. I think it's cool that you're now having visions that seem to be prophetic. It tells me you are a very special person."

Gabe sighed. "Don't know 'bout all that. All I know is I want to do God's will and I'm so freakin' in love with you. Those two things I know."

Taylor smiled. "Me too. I mean I'm in love with you."

He chuckled.

She swung around on the bench to straddle him and put her arms around his neck, leaned forward and kissed him. He held her tight, hugging her hard and then let his hands slip down to rest on her hips.

"I'm gonna miss you," he said.

She didn't answer, but when she blinked, tears ran down her face.

He didn't say anything. Just wiped them away.

"Work hard, Gabe. Don't get hurt."

"I will and I won't. It's exciting, isn't it? Finally, we're moving forward, working on our plans so that we can eventually be together. But let's not look too far down the road. Let's just take it one day at a time. I have to get through this first week of training, and I want to do well. Joey says it's gonna be the hardest thing I've ever done. He said how I trained with Grandmaster Kino for the Mini-MART is nothing compared to what I'm about to face. And that was hard."

Taylor nodded. "I know you can handle it. I'll pray for you every day, morning and night. And you can still call me right?"

"Yes. Though, don't be hurt if I'm so tired that I can't talk very long."

"I promise to not be hurt. I want you to do well."

"Thanks for that, babe, because after this first week, school starts and I'll be attending virtual classes every other day. But at least I'm only taking two subjects; business law and finance."

"Are you still going to minister online every day?"

"Yes. That was actually a stipulation Chief Lee and I made at the beginning. It only takes up a few minutes each day and he says he's interested to see what enlightenment comes through while I'm in training."

Taylor smiled. "I'm so proud of you, Gabe."

"Thanks, Tay, and I'm proud of you. Don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you in my life. You are my companion in all things. You are my shining light." He pulled her close and kissed her again, but once was not enough. They kissed a long time until he finally lifted her off his lap and set her aside. "We, uh, we need to go on in. I have to say goodbye to everyone and get on the road." He stood and pulled her up.

✝✝✝

Gabe'd gotten away with time to spare, which was good because he didn't want to be late. He was supposed to be inside the dorm by nine. The doors automatically lock, so if you arrive late and the doors have to be unlocked for you, it will be logged down. Christian music blaring on the radio, he sped along the highway, but slowed as he saw an older woman standing next to her car, her emergency flashers on, staring at the flat back tire. Blowing out a breath, he knew he had to stop. If he drove past and he heard the next day that something had happened to an old lady, he would never forgive himself.

He pulled over and backed up in the emergency lane until he was right in front of the white Toyota Camry. Gabe hopped out quickly and headed toward her. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Hello there young man."

"Hi! Can I help you with that?"

"I dunno. Can you?" she quipped.

He laughed. "Yes ma'am I can. Mind if I reach in and pop your trunk?"

"Pop away," she said.

He was moving fast. He stuck his head in the car and was surprised to see a man sitting in the passenger seat.

"Oh, hello sir."

The man nodded and spoke with a shaky voice. "Thank you for stopping to help. We're usually not on the road this late, but we've been at the hospital all day. I'd change the tire myself if I could, but I have a heart condition and I'm not doin' too well right now."

"I'm sorry to hear that sir. But I'm happy to be able to help. I'll have y'all on the road in no time." He popped the trunk and went to the back, hoping he wouldn't have to move a bunch of stuff out of the trunk to get to the tire. Thank goodness it was empty except for jumper cables and a case of water.

He pulled out the tire and jack and went to work. He smiled at the woman who watched him. "Won't take too long."

"I see that. You're movin' pretty quick there. I know how to change a tire, but I have to say, I wasn't lookin' forward to gettin' started on it."

Gabe grinned. "I get that, because I feel that way sometimes about a lot of things that I know I need to do."

The woman chuckled.

Gabe grunted as he worked to loosen the last lug nut. Once they were loose, he placed the jack and raised the car. "Y'all live around here?" Gabe asked.

"We do, but I think maybe you don't."

"Why's that?" he said as he switched out the tire.

"Y'all?"

He grinned. "Oh yeah, that. I'm from Georgia."

"Georgia! What are you doin' way over here in Cali?"

"I have a new job out here and I'm goin' to school at USC."

"Oh, that's nice," she said as she watched him screw on all the lug nuts.

"Your husband tells me he's not feelin' well," Gabe said as he finished lowering the car.

"No, he's not well at all. He has congestive heart failure and they just told us that he probably doesn't have too much longer on this earth."

"I'm sorry to hear that, ma'am," he said as he tightened all the lug nuts. Finishing up he nodded. "That oughta do it."

He put the damaged tire into the trunk. "Do you have a place you can go to get your tire fixed?"

"Oh yes. Right down the street from our house."

"Okay good." He started to say goodbye but stopped. He felt urged to get her information. "So, my name is Gabe. Gabe Tanner."

She held out her hand. "Gabe Tanner. That's a nice name. Is it really Gabriel? Like

the angel?"

"Yes ma'am, it's Gabriel. Though I'm no angel."

"Well you are in my book. Thank you so much for stopping to help."

"You're very welcome. Um, ma'am, may I get your name and number so that I can check up on you later?"

She frowned.

"Oh, I promise I'm not a bad guy," he added. He took out his wallet. "See, I'm an Ameritech Agent."

"Oh! That's your new job?"

"Yes ma'am. That's my ID and that's my badge rank, which is just a newbie, but I'm still an agent."

"I see. Well, my husband says Ameritech is a great company and he wished they were around when he was young after he got out of the service."

"I agree with your husband. My father is the Eastern Division Chief Director for Ameritech and watching him work and knowing the integrity of the company, I'm grateful to be able to work for them."

"That is simply wonderful. I'll get you our information. We'd love to talk to you some more."

She got back in her car and spoke to her husband and he reached in his wallet with shaky fingers and pulled out a card and handed it to her.

She took it and held it out to Gabe. "This is one of his old business cards. He used to be an electrician."

Gabe accepted the card and looked it over. "Well, Mrs. Bradshaw. It's nice to meet you." He went around to the other side and opened the passenger side door and offered his hand. "Mr. Bradshaw, nice to meet you. I don't want to sound weird, but, would you mind if I prayed for you real quick?"

The man smiled. "I don't mind at all."

Gabe placed his hand on the man's shoulder and prayed for his health, for his peace of mind, for his wife and for their whole family. He thanked God that he'd been able to help them this evening.

"Well," Gabe said. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm gonna be late if I don't hurry. Y'all have a great night."

"Good night, and thanks again," the woman said.

She watched as Gabe ran to his car and jumped in and glanced at her husband. "What a nice young man."

Mr. Bradshaw nodded his head. "Reminds me of William."

She nodded with a sigh. "He does indeed."

Her husband smiled. "God has a sense of humor."

Gabe put the pedal to the metal. He flew the rest of the way and came to a screeching halt at the gate of the training facility.

Lowering his window, an agent came out to check him in.

"Gabe Tanner," the agent said.

Gabe blinked up at him. "We've met?"

"Yes. I met you when you flew Ameritech out last year with your father. I was a newbie agent coming out to train. My name is Brooks Booth."

"Oh, yeah! I remember."

"I heard you were finally gonna start training." Brooks glanced at his watch. "You're really pushin' it. You know the doors lock at 9:00."

Gabe nodded. "I know, but I had to help a lady on the side of the road. Which way do I go?"

"Head to the left, then all the way around the circle to the green parking lot. Better hurry."

The gate opened and Gabe sped through, found a place, parked, grabbed up his canvas bag and rushed toward the doors.

He heard someone say, "Oh no, aw hell."

Gabe turned to see what was happening. It was another agent who'd apparently been carrying a box of folders. The box was upside down on the pavement and folders were blowing open and papers scattering. Gabe threw down his bag and ran after the papers that were blowing away. He grabbed up all that he could see and came back with them and helped the guy finish putting everything back in the box. Gabe then grabbed his bag and lifted the box himself. "Come on, we're gonna be late and the door locks at 9:00. Hurry."

The guy nodded and followed Gabe to the door. Gabe jerked it open, relieved that it hadn't locked yet. He held it for the other guy who finally made it and let the door shut. It immediately clicked.

Gabe smiled. "I think the door just locked."

The guy behind him smiled. "It did."

"Where do you want me to put the box?"

"Well let's see, I was running an errand for uh, the unit commander, Senior Agent Edwards," he said as they walked down a corridor. He pointed to the left. "That's his office down there at the end. If you could just leave it in front of the door that would be great."

Gabe ran down and set the box down at the door, turned and headed back.

The other agent smiled. "Thanks for your help. I'm here on the first floor. Do you know what floor you're on?"

Gabe nodded. "Third floor, section red."

The agent acted surprised. "Oh, you're gonna be a JETT!"

"I'm gonna give it my best," Gabe said with a smile.

The agent nodded. "I have a feelin' you're gonna do just fine. I'm Sam."

Gabe smiled at the man. Now that he saw him in the light he realized he was slightly older, getting a late start Gabe figured, like his friend Dalton. He offered his hand. "Gabe Tanner."

"Nice to meet you."

"You too, Sam," Gabe replied.

"Well, Gabe, you'd better hurry. You made it in the door by 9:00 but the unit commander is gonna be up to inspect your dorm in fifteen minutes. So, all clothes have

to be put away and you have to be undressed in a t-shirt and shorts."

Gabe nodded. "Got it. Thanks." He turned to run, then turned back. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"You will, I'm sure."

Gabe took off, ran to the end of the corridor, ran up two flights of stairs and looked for the red flag next to his dorm. He opened the door.

"There he is," someone said.

Gabe smiled. "Hey."

One guy frowned. "You're late. Better hurry. We don't wanna bad first day because of you."

Gabe nodded and looked around.

Another agent pointed. "That bunk at the end is yours, Tanner. Come on, I'll help you get set up."

Gabe smiled. It was one of the guys he'd met on the plane yesterday.

The guy opened the footlocker and Gabe opened his bag, lifted everything out and placed it as neatly as possible into the footlocker. He placed his Bible on the pillow of his bunk. He pulled off his jeans, kept his gray t-shirt on, threw his jeans, shoes and socks in the footlocker and looked around. "Anything else I need to do?"

"When the commander comes in you stand at attention in the front of your bed," the guy who'd spoken first ordered.

Gabe nodded with a friendly smile. "That part I know." He turned and smoothed the blanket on his bed. Turned back and nodded at the agent who'd helped him. "Thanks for the help, man."

"No problem. I guess that Taylor Kino is hard to pull away from."

Gabe grinned. "Well, she is that, but that's not..."

"Attention!"

They all rushed to stand at the end of their beds. Gabe let his eyes roam over the rest of the room. There were twelve guys. All the beds were single, no top bunks. All of the guys seemed pretty fit. Some had very short hair. A few had very long hair. Most were like him. He wondered if they would all have to shave their heads like in the military. He'd never thought to ask about that. He remembered Jake had to at first, but then he was allowed to grow his hair back. He shifted his eyes to look at the man who was slowly walking down the row, not saying a word but eyeing each guy and each bed. He stopped to look inside a few of the footlockers. Gabe hoped he didn't look inside his, because he hadn't had time to make it look ordered.

The man came slowly down the row of bunks, all the way to Gabe and stood right in front of him. Gabe swallowed hard, as he wondered if he'd done something wrong.

"State your name."

"Gabriel Tanner, sir."

"I see. So, Gabriel Tanner, I understand that you made it inside the door with only seconds to spare."

"Yes sir."

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

Gabe drew a breath. “I say— I was inside the unit before 9:00 o’clock as instructed, sir.”

There was a slight murmuring from the other newbie agents and the man turned his head sharply. There was again silence.

“I see. And do you always push things to the last minute?”

“No sir. I’m usually early. I believe being late is rude.”

“Then why did you push it to the last minute?”

“I, uh, I made a choice to do something that detained me a little bit.”

“Maybe next time make better choices.”

“Well, sir, if I had the chance to do it again, I’d make the same choice.”

The agent’s eyes narrowed and he decided to push it.

“Okay, Tanner, explain.”

“There was an older woman on the side of the road with a flat tire. I started to hurry on past, but I thought what if I heard on the news tomorrow that some woman was hurt while trying to change her tire. So, I pulled over and did it for her. I thought, this is what an Ameritech Agent would do, even if he were on the way to an important meeting. Unlike some law enforcement agencies, *we* truly do serve and protect. So, I did what I did and will accept the consequences.”

The man only nodded. Then looked at him again. “Well, you got in and got ready pretty fast. Dare I look inside your locker?”

Gabe sighed. “That is your prerogative, sir.”

“Will I like what I see?”

Gabe’s lips pressed together. “Well sir, my educated guess would be that you would be somewhat disappointed.”

Another murmur from the other agents.

The commander looked around and started walking slowly toward the front. “You will all soon learn that at Ameritech we do things differently than the military. We use logic and reason and justice and honesty. We don’t try to tear you down and rebuild you, because you don’t even get hired if you’re not already somewhat built into a man. We hone you. We are a team, but we are also individuals. The whole team does not get punished for the poor work of one man. We go on a more positive approach.”

He turned abruptly. “Agent Tanner’s honesty can set an example. He was strong in the face of adversity, that adversity being— me. Honesty is absolutely essential at Ameritech. Agent Tanner knew that his honesty would also probably earn him some kind of punishment. Not for being honest, but for things not being as they should. Whether because of laziness or some arbitrary circumstances, we have to accept responsibility, which he just said he would do. Therefore, Agent Tanner, I’m gonna need you to drop and give me twenty pushups right now. Everyone else– count for him.”

Gabe immediately did as ordered as everyone counted.

He finished and stood back at attention.

The man nodded. “My name is Agent Wayne. I am NOT your unit commander. I AM a JETT. I am here to introduce you to your unit commander. Your commander is

Senior Agent Samuel Edwards. You will remain at attention unless ordered otherwise." He turned and went to the door and opened it. He stepped outside and waited. A full two minutes later, a man walked in the door holding a box in his hands.

Gabe's eyes opened bigger as he recognized the box and the man.

The man handed the box to Agent Wayne and turned to face the twelve new agents. He nodded his head at the room at large, but didn't look at Gabe directly. "Agents, welcome to Ameritech. I am Senior Agent Samuel Edwards. You may simply call me Commander. As Agent Wayne probably just pointed out, we do things a little differently than the military, though we still maintain strict discipline, respect and honor. You've been interviewed several times. You've passed an entrance exam. You've passed a preliminary physical exam. You, the twelve of you, are a team. However, you are also individuals.

"Here at Ameritech only under certain circumstances do we ever go out on assignment as a team. Most assignments are single or with a partner. However, we stand by each other, we root for each other and we want only the best for each other. We are not in competition with each other. We are in competition with ourselves, so adjust your thinking. You are not here to outdo each other. You are here to learn and to prove yourselves worthy. You are expected to help each other in any way possible. You are expected to want each other's success. We are strict, but we are just. Give this your absolute all. Give it everything you've got. Odds are that only half of you will make it through this training."

Each new agent shuffled slightly at the disheartening statement. Gabe cast his eyes down, frowning.

"Agent Tanner."

Gabe's head snapped up.

"I see you frowning. When at attention you do not show visible emotion of any kind. Your facial expressions should remain neutral."

Gabe quickly made the correction. "Yes sir. Sorry sir." Of course, he knew that. He'd observed his father and Master Appel and Jake and the Kinos and all the agents make their faces unreadable.

"Drop down and give me twenty."

Gabe did as ordered.

The commander looked around surprised at the other agents. "Why are you not counting?"

They looked at him surprised, and started to count for Gabe's last five.

He shook his head. "Nope. All of you drop down and give me twenty. Tanner join them."

They all did twenty, Gabe did twenty more and they all counted aloud.

"Alright then, Agent Tanner, since you have made yourself distinctly notable, I want to know your thoughts. Why did you frown at my statement?"

Gabe's eyes opened wide. "Oh! Well, sir, I mean..." He stopped, unsure if he should say what he was thinking.

"Spit it out, Tanner. There is no wrong or right answer. I simply asked for your

thoughts."

Gabe sighed. "Well, sir, you said the odds are that only half of us will succeed. I would like our unit to beat those odds."

"What makes you think this unit is so special?"

"I'm not sure that I think we are any more special than any other unit. But just because most units have had a fifty percent kind of success rate, doesn't mean we have to follow suit. It doesn't dictate what we're gonna achieve. Every person here is gonna give it their best I'm sure. And, well, we might just surprise you...um, Commander, sir."

The man looked deeply into Gabe's eyes for several moments. Then nodded and backed away. "Alright then, show me it can be done."

Gabe nodded. "I'll do my best sir. I don't like to fail."

The commander nodded. "That, I believe." He turned to Agent Wayne. "Hand out the folders please."

Commander Edwards waited until it was done. "Before you go to sleep tonight, you are to read what is contained in these folders and memorize the agenda for the next week and your schedule for tomorrow. That's first. Now, even though we are individuals, we are also a team. You will be issued skivvies and uniforms to wear each day. Those items are in a plastic unit with your name on it in the hallway outside. Find yours. It goes under your bunk. It will hold your clean clothing. Keep it neat. Items folded. No wrinkled uniforms. Socks matched. Your footlockers also must be kept neat and clean, your personal clothing folded neatly. Keep your shoes clean. No sand or mud. None. Hygiene products, as you should already know from the admission letters, include a toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss, shampoo, soap, washcloth, towel, and deodorant and they are kept neat and clean in the metal basket inside your lockers. Cell phones will be left in your lockers during training times.

"There will be daily and weekly inspections of every inch of this room, of your beds, of your lockers and the plastic storage container for your clothes. Keep it all pristine. You have nights and Sundays off. I suggest you designate one day to doing your personal laundry. Your bed linens will be washed weekly. That will be done for you as we believe your time is better spent learning other things. Do not be the one being called a slob. Taking care of your own filth is considerate and responsible. Be both. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

Commander Edwards nodded. "Then I will leave you to it. I will see you all in the morning at 0600 hours in this same position, dressed and ready for inspection. There will be a devotional and prayer at breakfast. You do not have to participate but I am inviting you. You will not be frowned upon if you choose to not participate. Agent Wayne is an honored guest and has other duties and will not be available to baby sit you after tomorrow, so if you have questions for him, I suggest you use tomorrow to ask. Ask him pertinent questions, for example, how you can succeed at this task. That is all for now. Good night. I wish you well."

"Good night, sir," they all said as one.

Gabe breathed a sigh of relief. Sat on his bed and immediately opened his folder.

He wanted to get it memorized as quickly as possible so he could get some sleep. A few of the agents came over to his bunk though, and he looked up at them. “Hey guys.”

They nodded. “So, whaddya got in mind, Tanner?” one said.

Gabe frowned. “Not sure what you mean.”

“Well first,” another began. “Agent Cader said you’re the son of the Eastern Division Chief Director Keegan Tanner.”

Gabe nodded and glanced at Agent Cader, who’d been on the flight with him the day before. “Yes, Keegan Tanner is my father,” he said softly, hoping they didn’t think he was using that to his advantage.

“When Cader told us that, we realized you are THE Gabe Tanner. The one who won the martial arts tournaments and the one who was kidnapped.”

Gabe nodded his head again, wondering where this conversation was headed. “Yes, that was me.”

“And the one who’s dating Ricky Kino’s daughter,” another added.

Gabe nodded. “Right again.”

“The one who has the *Gabe Tanner Foundation* and owns the *Gabe Tanner Community Centers*.”

“Well, *I* don’t own them. The Foundation owns them, but yeah, I mean, they consult with me.”

“All that and you’re only eighteen,” another said.

Gabe nodded.

“And you’re the youngest one in this room.”

Gabe’s eyebrows raised. “Really? I didn’t know that.”

“So, you think this makes you special?”

Gabe frowned. “No. It makes me grateful.”

“But you get special privileges because of your father.”

“Special? I don’t think so. I mean, I passed every test legitimately. If anything, it makes me a target, as this conversation is proving, and as the only one made to do three sets of pushups a moment ago.”

“So, what, are we supposed to feel sorry for you, then?”

Gabe shook his head. “Nope. Not even close. I can handle it just fine. I don’t need anyone’s sympathy.”

“So, what did you have in mind?” Agent Cader asked again.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when you said our unit could have better odds. What did you have in mind?”

Gabe smiled. “Oh, that. Well, I don’t see why we should go into our training thinking half of us won’t make it. That’s loser thinking. That kind of gives you, or, I mean us, an out. Like, if we fail we might think, oh well, half of us weren’t gonna make it anyway.”

“So, what’s the alternative?” another agent asked.

Gabe shrugged. “Why don’t we go into it thinking that this unit, the red team, we’re gonna make our own statistic. This unit is gonna be the first unit where every

single one of us becomes a JETT."

"That's impossible."

Gabe sighed. "Well yeah, it is if you think that, but if you change up the way you're thinking, we could actually make it happen. *I* believe we can, anyway. I really do. Why not try? No outs. We can do this. It's gonna be hard. There's gonna be times when you have to throw up and keep on going. When you pass out and then get up again and keep on going. Where you have to study extra hard or get someone to help you. Times when you only get a few hours of sleep. There might be times when one of us has to carry you on our backs. But we can do this. And besides, you've got me."

"And what difference does that make? Didn't you just say that you don't get any special treatment?"

"I don't, but I do have some inside scoops. I know a lot of agents. I know my father. I know a bunch of JETTs. I know Chief Lee and Chief Adams and Assistant Chief Davis. They won't give me special treatment, but it still gives me an edge because I've heard the stories and I know what they expect. And if it gives *me* an edge then that means it gives *you* an edge, because I want you to make it. I want me to make it. I want to achieve something that's never been done. So, if you have any questions, any problem, any situation, come to me and if I don't have the solution, I'll get it. We can do this." He looked around and realized all eleven agents were standing around his bunk.

"When I was training under Grandmaster Kino for those tournaments I thought I was gonna die. It was so hard. But the feeling of coming through that and then actually winning, it's such an awesome feeling of accomplishment. I want you all to have that feeling. I'm sure some of you probably already have experienced that kind of thing. So, let's do it again. Let's become history here at AMT. Let's do what some think is impossible."

"Sounds all good, Tanner. I'm in," Agent Cader said.

"Me too," another said.

When they all chimed in and agreed to make sure they all make it, Gabe smiled. "So, like, this is cool."

"Where do you think we start?" one asked.

Gabe shrugged. "Well, the task tonight is to memorize the information in this folder. So, let's get to it."

A guy sighed. "I've always struggled with memorization."

Gabe nodded. "Okay, cool. So see, we have one of us that needs help. Anyone else have that kind of problem?"

A few nodded. "Y'all come sit on my bed. I'll help you. The rest, go do your thing. It won't matter what questions the Commander asks in the morning. We're all gonna know our stuff."

Agent Cader smiled. "Let's get to it."

✝✝✝

January 13th 6:05 AM PST Monday Morning

Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

"Agent Ritter," Commander Edwards said loudly.

"Yes sir," the agent answered.

"What will be our main focus today?"

"Strength, fitness and agility, sir."

Gabe allowed a slight smile. Good job, he thought.

"Agent Hall."

"Yes sir."

"What will you be doing at 3 PM today?"

It took him a few seconds to answer. "I will be in the middle of an obstacle course run, sir."

The Commander nodded. "Agent Blade."

"Yes sir."

"What will be our focus on Thursday?"

The agent closed his eyes for a brief moment. "It will be..."

Gabe held his breath.

"It will be weapons. A weapons course."

"What weapons?"

"Handgun and rifle, sir."

Gabe smiled.

"Tanner."

"Yes sir."

"Are we standing at attention?"

"Yes sir."

"Did you just smile?"

Gabe sighed. "Yes sir."

"Give me twenty."

"Yes sir."

Gabe hit the floor while the team counted. When he stood back up the Commander nodded.

"Tanner, what will you be doing tomorrow night around 8 PM?"

Gabe tried not to smile. "I will be cleaning this room, checking with my fellow agents here to see if I can help them with anything, taking a shower, reading my Bible, saying my prayers and making a— quick call to my girl."

"Why would you check with your fellow agents? Are they not responsible for themselves?"

"Yes sir, they are responsible for themselves. But we are also a team, so we are also somewhat responsible for each other. Unless, I misunderstand the meaning of the word team. I understand that we all have to do our part, but if someone is struggling, I'm gonna try to help."

"You talk a lot, did you know that Tanner?"

Gabe nodded slightly. "I've been told that, sir."

The Commander now struggled to keep the smile from his face. He looked around. "Well done, Red Team. You are dismissed for breakfast." He turned and left the room.

The guys headed to the building adjacent to the dorms. Inside that building the agents all rushed into the hall. Gabe stayed outside and took out his phone and went live. He walked down by a window. “Hey everyone. So, here I am, finally at AMT training. Learning so much already. I’m getting ready to go in and eat some breakfast. Here’s a little lesson for the day that I had reinforced yesterday. He went on to tell how he was almost late and why and how he had to answer for being almost late.

“So, what the lesson is I guess, is, I could’ve not stopped to help those people, I could’ve not stopped to chase down those papers. It would’ve been much easier to just worry about myself and head straight to the facility, straight to the dorm and remain invisible to the Commander, but I had to do the right thing. So, to me, that means that even if it makes it harder on us, we should have the courage to do the right thing. That’s our cross to bear. That’s when we pick it up and carry whatever burden is put on us.” He stopped and smiled. “Besides, as you all probably know, twenty pushups is nothing for me.” He grinned. “So, I’ve gotta go eat. I’ll ask to see if I can video some of the training. That would be fun. We’ll see. Until then, go out and make a difference my fellow warriors for God. I love you. And shoutout to my girl. Love you, Taylor!”

He ended the live video and headed into get his breakfast.

The Commander however was standing in the doorway.

Gabe nodded. “Hello sir.”

“Hello Gabe. I just wanted to take a minute to let you know that your honor and integrity has not gone unnoticed by me and I also wanted to thank you personally for helping me last night. It might seem I’m picking on you a bit, but doing that helps the others to learn from you. They learn from the questions I ask you and your answers to those question. And picking on you a bit keeps them from thinking that you’re getting special privileges because of your father and because you are also close with both Chief Lee and Chief Adams, Division Chief Davis and Senior Agent Wallace.”

Gabe smiled. “So, I guess you could actually say that by being hard on me, you’re doing me a big favor.”

The Commander smiled. “Now you get it. Though that’s just an added bonus, it’s not the main reason.”

“Oh. Hmm, then if that’s not the main reason, then why me?”

He grinned. “Because your father and Chief Lee and Chief Adams and Division Chief Davis and Senior JETT Agent Wallace each told me to go extra hard on you.”

Gabe nodded in acceptance.

“So, what? You have nothing to say about that?”

Gabe smiled and shook his head. “Not really, sir. I mean, well, I have an immense amount of respect for each of those men, and it that’s what they want, then the only thing I can really say to that is, ‘bring it on.’”

Commander Edwards nodded with satisfaction. “You, Gabriel Tanner, are an inspiring young man.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Go eat.”

“Yes sir.”

✝✝✝

January 13th, 12:00 Noon PST Monday
Bell Home, Lake Forest, California

Ryder Bell pulled his Honda Civic up to the front of the small home. His father's truck wasn't there. He knew it wouldn't be because he drove past the auto repair shop that his father owned. The shop looked the same as always. Cars everywhere. Messy. Dirty. Busy. At the house, the house where he'd grown up and endured so many beatings, his stepmother's car was in the driveway. She was usually off on Monday's because she worked on Saturdays. It appeared that also had not changed. He walked to the front door, his heart beating hard, and knocked on the door.

It took a full minute before he heard someone walk to the door. He looked into the peephole so she could see it was him. She finally opened the door and put her hands to her face. "Ryder!"

She looked past him to see if there was anyone else.

"I'm alone," he said.

She opened the door wider. "Come in, come in."

He stepped through the door and she immediately threw her arms around him and hugged him.

He hugged her and when he tried to let go, she held on and he realized she was crying.

He patted her back. "Naomi, it's okay."

She sniffed and pulled away. "I'm sorry. I've just been so worried about you. You didn't even tell me goodbye when you left."

"I'm sorry. I was pretty messed up at the time."

She nodded. "I know. I remember and I understand."

"Where are the girls?"

"Callie is napping and Ellie is at preschool."

Ryder sighed. "Okay, so, listen, Naomi, because I don't have much time. I'm on my lunch break."

"Oh! Where are you working?"

"I'm working construction."

"Wonderful. So, why did you come by?"

"I was worried about you and my sisters."

She looked down immediately.

"You don't have to hide it. The man who took me in did a check..."

"Took you in?"

"Yeah, I was homeless, living on the streets for awhile. I don't have time to tell you all about it, but I'm doing fine now. I have a home and a job and I'm gonna make something of myself. But Naomi, I'm worried about you. The man who took me in did a check on me and my father. They found out that there has been two domestic violence calls to this address after I left. That tells me that he's either hurting you or hurting the girls."

She sighed and nodded. "He hasn't hurt the girls. But Ryder, he was drinking both

times. He wasn't in his right mind."

"You're not really making excuses for him, are you?"

She looked down. "Listen, it's only been those two times."

"You mean, two times where it was bad enough to call the police?"

"I don't know what to say to you." She reached up and touched his face in a loving gesture.

He sighed. "What happened those two times?"

"Well, he locked me out of the house one time and the girls were inside and I needed to get back in so I called the police. He didn't really hurt me. He threw me out and locked the door."

Ryder shook his head.

"And the other time, he was really bad drunk, talking about killing himself and burning down the house with us in it and he scared me."

"What did the police do?"

"They arrested him, took him in and kept him overnight and I bailed him out the next day."

"And that was it?"

She sighed. "Well, of course he was mad at me for having him arrested."

"Did he hit you?"

She touched her cheek as she remembered. "It wasn't too bad."

"That tells me that there has been more than one time when he's hit you. Do you know he's not allowed to hit you?"

She had no answer. Just stood there with tears in her eyes.

"Naomi, there is a way out. I have some new friends, friends in high places. They've been watching this place. If there are signs of domestic violence they will come and help you."

"The police are watching the house?"

"No, not the police. It's a private company. They're watching from the outside and they track his vehicle. But they can do a lot more if you give them permission to put in some security cameras inside the home."

"Oh, Ryder, if your father ever found out he'd kill me for sure."

"He won't find out. These cameras are tiny. He'd never know they're here, and Ameritech will monitor and know when things are bad and will not allow him to hurt you. They will intervene."

She frowned. "I don't know about this, Ryder."

He sighed. "Do you still love him? Is that it? I mean, are you saying that you want to stay with him?"

She sighed. "We've only been married six years. How can things change so quickly from wonderful to a nightmare?"

Ryder shook his head. "He didn't change so quickly. He hurt my mother. He hurt her bad and he hurt my baby sister when she was only two. He slammed her against a wall. And he beat me all the time. You've seen that. I'm not lying. My mom didn't desert me like he told you. He ran her off. He told her she could leave and he wouldn't

kill her but she had to leave me behind. She didn't want to, but I begged her to go and save herself and my sister. A few years later he met you at that bar. He wasn't the nice guy you thought he was. I know it seemed like he was because he even fooled me. I thought he'd changed. I thought you were this amazing person who'd come along and tamed him. And you did, for a minute. But the real monster started showing himself again."

Ryder stopped and sighed. "Ya know, I thought it was okay. I mean, at least he's just taking his frustrations out on me. I took it as long as I could but then I had to leave. I was eighteen and enough was enough. But I feel like I deserted you Naomi, and I'm sorry about that. I left you alone to fend for yourself and the girls and I want to fix that. I can help you. I now have the means to help you, but that help starts with the security cameras."

"I don't know, Ryder."

"Please, Naomi. Let me help you. Let me help my sisters. You know, what he does to you, or worse what he could do them if he turns on them, it could scar them for life, or even end their lives."

She sighed. "What do the cameras look like?"

"They are about the size of a thumbtack and they're dark. They won't be visible. They will pick up all audio. They won't be in bathrooms or your bedroom so you won't have to worry about privacy. Just say yes, and it will take them about ten minutes to place them. They would probably be here first thing in the morning right after Dad leaves for work."

"But I have to leave for work about fifteen minutes after your father."

Ryder nodded. "I think they can be here right when he leaves and will only take a few minutes."

She chewed on her lip.

Ryder's phone buzzed and he pulled it out of his pocket. "Hello?"

"Ryder, this is Ginny at Ameritech. Your father is on his way to the house. You have about ten minutes."

He frowned. "Oh, okay. How did you know it was me visiting, cuz I didn't tell anyone I was coming here."

"I saw you drive up and ran your plates."

"How did you know my number?"

She laughed. "This is Ameritech. Easy peazy. But you need to leave."

"Thank you. I'll leave in just a minute." He put his phone away. "That was the company I was telling you about. They say Dad is headed this way, so, I have to get out of here."

Her eyes opened wide. "How do they know that?"

"They've been watching him."

"Why?"

"To protect you on my behalf. They're good people, Naomi. Will you give them permission to help you?"

She nodded. "Okay, Ryder, if you'll go ahead and leave, I'll say 'yes.' Now leave."

She hugged him again and put her hand on his cheek. “You’ve grown up into a man, Ryder. I wish I could hold onto you.”

He nodded. He understood she felt that way because she was alone and vulnerable and afraid. “I’ll come back to see you and my sisters. I miss them.”

Her eyes filled. “They miss you.” She threw her arms around him again. “I’m so sorry, Ryder. I’m so sorry I didn’t protect you.”

“Come on now, Naomi, there was no way you could protect me. But I can now protect you and I’m gonna make it happen. You, Naomi, need to figure out if staying with my father is worth your life or the lives of the girls, because he’s not gonna change. He almost killed my mother and baby sister. Don’t let him hurt you or the girls. Not anymore.”

She didn’t answer.

“Give me your phone.”

She unlocked it and handed it to him and he quickly put in his number. “This is my number. Call me if you need me, day or night.”

He opened the front door, then turned and smiled at her. “You’re gonna be okay. It’ll all work out.”

She held it open and watched him leave. He jumped in his car and took off. A few minutes later her husband drove up.

✝✝✝

Psalm 46:1

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”

Chapter Eight

January 13th, 3:00 PM EST Monday Afternoon

Main Street, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice slowed as he got inside the city limits, the word, “city” on the sign making him laugh because in his own judgement, Pine Forest was a small, very attractive little *town*. He’d seen pictures and now that he was driving down Main Street, it was the definition of quaint.

First thing he’d passed inside the city limit was the *DQ* on his left. He smiled. There was an old joke about every small town in the south had at least a *DQ* and a *Dollar General*. The next thing he passed was a small bus station, and right next to it, the *Dollar General*. He chuckled.

Across the street from that looked promising for dinner, *Sally's Steakhouse*. He waited at a red light at Dogwood Trail, a street that had been mentioned in the journals his sister had found and devoured. Looking to his right on Dogwood Trail he could see a fire station. Just past Dogwood Trail on his left was a large church. As he proceeded across Dogwood, he slowed and read the sign, *Pine Forest Community Church of Christ*. Then there was a small green space and a Gazebo with a sign that read *City Park.* Across from that was the post office and next to the post office was *Clara's Café*, which was obviously converted from an older home. He wondered if that home was one of the originals.

Next to the café was a large, old brick building. It was obviously historical. Well built. Lovely design. Across the top of the building, actually engraved into white concrete it read, *W. F. Armstrong Building*. That too was written about in the journals his sister had found.

He was going too slow and holding up traffic behind him, so he pulled into one of the parking spaces to the right that ran along the sides of the street, so he could get a better look at the building. It was a commercial space. He counted the store fronts. Three businesses were being run here; *Pine Forest Realty, The Book Nook*, and *Touch of Class Men's Formal*. He nodded in approval. The mannequins in the window were modern and well-dressed.

He got out of the car so he could look at the building across the street. It was even larger and it too was a historical building. The sign across the top declared it as such, '*The Old Bank Building.*' He smiled. Just like the Armstrong building, it was brick and had lovely architecture with brick arches above the upper windows and amazing detail. He knew that work on both buildings had been done by a man named Henry Halford. Eyeing the store fronts contained in the old building, he saw the *Main Street Market, Emma's Bakery*, a vacant space, a bridal shop and a florist. One stop shopping, he thought as he looked down the street.

Lovely black iron street lights lined the walks. He imagined those street lights had recently been wrapped in red ribbons and boughs of evergreen for Christmas. The lights arched out over the parking spaces that ran along each side of the street at an angle to the shops. The sidewalks were clean. The street was clean. The entire place was immaculate. They obviously took pride in their little town.

Music drifted out from a large stand-alone building on his side of the street, next to the Armstrong building that took up the entire corner lot. *Joe's Family Grill and Bar*, it read on a sign out front and on the side of the building. The building was a deep mustard yellow with brown trim. It had large windows with awnings and strings of white lights around the building. He might check it out while he's in town.

Across Main Street from Joe's was a modern bank with a drive-thru and it took up the corner opposite Joe's. He let his eyes wonder further down the street, past the street light. The cross street there was Pine Street, of course, he thought. He was pretty sure he could see his destination, but he didn't want to go straight there. He wanted to scout out the area. It was like he didn't want to open the present too fast. He wanted to take his time.

Getting back in his car he pulled out of the parking space and continued down main street. Across Pine, there was an old historical home that was now an attorney's office, and then the original mayor's house. Justice's heart sped up, but he forced himself to look away.

Glancing across the street from the mayor's house was the Pine Forest First Baptist Church that took up the entire corner. Next to that was another large brick building with beautiful details that said, '*Appel Martial Arts.*' He'd heard of that because of the young Gabe Tanner who was currently pretty much an American hero, at least he was in his book. He looked closely at the building as he passed. There appeared to be people inside. He might check that out too while he's here, maybe even take a class.

Across from the martial arts studio was a park and then, the famous, *Gabe Tanner Community Center*. He would definitely check that out. The light here at the end of the street was green. He thought about going straight and staying on Main and see what other jewels this town held, but decided to turn right on Hill Street and circle around so he could come back to his true destination. He drove to the next light where there was an Ingle's grocery store on the northwest corner and a gas station and auto repair shop on the northeast corner. He turned right on College Street. On his right was a copse of trees and the back area of the community center. He saw a place called *Bucky's BBQ*, and then another historical home that appeared to be turned into more of a fine dining type restaurant called *The Dillon House*.

He came to the next light, which was Pine Street again. On his left was the *Pine Forest Public Library* and on his right, a drugstore. If he were to go straight he could see it was *City Hall* on the right taking up the entire corner. Across from *City Hall* was the *Pine County Sheriff's department*. He turned right on Pine. Behind City Hall there was a large parking lot that was situated between the back of City Hall and Joe's place. Justice thought that is probably where most of Joe's customers park. He wondered if "Joe" was still running the place.

Finally, he got back to the light at Main Street and turned right and pulled up in front of the old Sawyer homestead. He simply sat there gazing at the three story brick building, actually two stories and a large attic. It was old, worn. The front door was on the left. To the right of the door was a large arched double window with elaborate brickwork around it. Again, he knew it was Henry Halford's work.

Above the door on the second floor was another arched window, smaller, and above the arched window on the first floor were two of the smaller arched windows. The brickwork was intricate and beautiful. The windows would have to be replaced, and the old worn door too, though he would have to save the lovely old hardware. The concrete steps walking up to the door were broken. The entire porch and steps would have to be torn down and replaced.

He looked around the outside. He would go back to City Hall and see who would be in charge of the sale. The home had been sitting unoccupied for years. He circled the place and started to leave but suddenly felt the urge to go up the steps and peek in the windows. The porch was small, and he had to lean way over the railing to see in the window, but he really couldn't see much except a dark hardwood floor and the edge of

a fireplace. Trying the door, he was totally surprised when it opened.

Poking his head in he looked around. It appeared to be empty. He stepped inside, and just in case some one was here, he knocked loudly on the open door. “Hello? Anybody in here?”

Waiting a few seconds to see if anyone answered, he walked into the home. He stood there silently, letting the essence of the place seep in. Then he jumped at a loud thump. It sounded like it came from the back of the house. Stealthily, he made his way to the back. He stopped in awe when he came to a large kitchen, but the kitchen was not what was so awe-inspiring. It was the breathtaking girl standing in the kitchen.

Well, actually, a woman, a beautiful woman. She had headphones on and a tape measure in her hands. An open tool box lay off to one side of the floor. Even that was not what was awe-inspiring. She was dancing. Swaying her hips slowly, nodding her head. Then, to his delight, she started singing.

“Last dance...last dance... for loo-ove...”

Whoever this young lady is, she was good.

“Yes, it's my last chance, for romance, tonight...”

Her voice was the sweetest he’d ever heard. He couldn’t see her face, but from behind she was something. She had a long blond braid down her back. The tight jeans showed off an athletic body, and whatever the sweatshirt was hiding he was sure was just as good.

“Oh, I need you, by me, beside me, to guide, to hold me, to scold me

'Cause when I'm bad, I'm so, so bad.”

His brows rose at the lyrics. He knew the song, Last dance, by Donna Summer.

The girl bobbed her head and raised the tape measure to stretch over the length of the counter top. He wondered if she was part of a crew hired to do some renovations to help sell the place. They were about to find that they wouldn’t have to worry about that. He knew the minute the tempo changed.

She put the tape measure on the counter as she chanted, “last dance, oh last da-ance, last dance, oh last da-ance...”

She was really gyrating her hips now and began jumping up and down and then spun around and— she screamed.

He held out his hands and started apologizing immediately while at the same time she stumbled backward and tripped over the tool box.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sneak up on you, I’m sorry.”

He said the words while his eyes took in the most beautiful face he’d ever seen. Big blue eyes looked up at him, wide with fear. His eyes traveled down to see that she was reaching for a weapon tucked inside the front of her jeans. He immediately stepped back and held his hands in the air.

“Don’t draw. Please. I didn’t mean to scare you. The door was open. I swear. I’m sorry. I knocked. I called out.”

She kept her hand on the hand grip of the gun. “Step back.”

“Can I help you up?”

She shook her head. “No. Step back, please.”

He stepped back.

"Farther," she said breathlessly.

He stepped all the way back to the threshold of the kitchen and watched as she untangled her legs and stood up, her breath still coming fast.

She looked the man over. He was clean, actually well-dressed, and looked harmless enough.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I didn't mean to scare you. I was looking the place over and came up to peek in the window and when I touched the door, it opened. I couldn't resist coming in."

She nodded. "The lock on the door is not aligned. It takes a great deal of effort to get it to close, so I left it open."

He smiled at her voice. It was soft and sweet, like when she was singing. He drew a breath. "I knocked really loud and called out to see if anyone was here and noone answered."

She nodded again. "I had headphones on," she said, stating the obvious.

He smiled. "And then I heard you start singing and I really just couldn't move. You had me mesmerized."

She laughed. "Right."

"I'm not kidding."

She blew out a breath and took her hand off the gun.

"So you're not gonna shoot me anymore?"

"Not sure yet," she said. "So, you said you were looking the place over. You wanna tell me why that is?"

"Because I want to buy it."

Her brows rose. "Buy it?"

"Yes."

"Well, sorry, but it's not for sale."

"Are you sure? Because the last information I had was it's been sitting empty for years."

"That's true. But it's not for sale."

"The town doesn't want to make the money for the sale?"

"They already made the money. It's not for sale because it's been sold."

"Since when?"

"Since the middle of December."

"Oh," he said softly. The disappointment washed over him. He felt immediately defeated.

"When did you get the information that told you it was for sale?" Lily asked.

He sighed. "Well, I admit it was seven months ago. Last June."

She shrugged. "That's some pretty old information."

He nodded. "Do you know who bought it? You must know because you're here working on it, right?"

"Yes, I know."

"Do you think they might want to sell it?"

She shook her head.

"Can you give me the names of the people who bought it? Put me in touch with them?"

"I'm really not supposed to give out their information. But it doesn't matter. As soon as they bought it, they signed it over as a gift to someone else."

He sighed again. Then looked up. "That's quite a gift to give someone."

"Yes, you're sure right about that."

"Do you know who they gave it too?"

"Yes."

"Do you know them well?"

"I do. *Very* well."

"Will you put them in touch with me?"

"Maybe."

"Okay. Let me give you one of my cards," he said as he reached in his back pocket. "Ya see, I've driven a long way to see this place."

"Really? Where did you drive from?"

"Topeka, Kansas."

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh! Well, that's a very long way to drive to see a place based on old information. Maybe you should have called."

He sighed. "It's actually a long story and a personal story."

She smiled and shrugged. "I've got time."

"Well, that's very kind of you to hear the long story of a stranger, but I'm tired. I've driven all day. I have to go check in at the place I'm staying and have a decent meal. Maybe— I could talk you into sharing that meal with me."

She smiled sweetly, which almost took his breath away, but then she shook her head.

"Sorry. I can't, I have to work tonight."

"Oh, well, how about tomorrow?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure."

He nodded. "I get it. I mean, you don't even know my name and I don't know yours. So, what is your name?"

She smiled and held out her hand. "I'm Lily."

He nodded and took her hand. "Hello, Lily. That is a beautiful name for a beautiful girl."

She blushed. "Thank you."

"I call it like I see it. I'm Justice," he said.

"Justice? Now that's an interesting name."

"A hard one to live up to, but I'm trying." He smiled. "So, are you still not sure about tomorrow?"

"I'm a little busy."

"Okay, so, how about just coffee? I mean, may I buy you a cup of coffee tomorrow morning?"

"Where?"

"Um," he looked up with a grin. "I guess I'm not sure. Do you know of a place nearby?"

She nodded. "*Front Porch Coffee* is a good place. It's just on the corner of Pine Street and Church Street."

He nodded. "I'll find it."

"Meet me there at 8:00," she said.

"I am very much looking forward to it."

She smiled. "Do you know where you're staying tonight?"

"I have a reservation for a cottage at the *Pine Forest Country Inn*."

"Really? Well, that's a nice place."

"That's what I hear."

"Do you know how long you'll be staying in town?" Lily asked.

He shrugged. "Until I convince the owner of this place to sell it to me."

She shook her head. "That's probably not gonna happen."

"Ya never know. Maybe for the right price."

"Money doesn't mean much to the owner. There are so many things more important than money."

"I agree. Which is why I'm willing to spend whatever necessary to buy it." He frowned. "So, by the way, what are you doing here?"

She smiled. "I was getting some measurements to see what kind of renovations to make for the kitchen. Looks like it's gonna be a gut job."

"Are you an interior designer?"

"Only when it comes to kitchens."

"I see." He smiled as he looked her over. "Are you okay, I mean, from falling down? Did you get hurt at all?"

She shook her head. "Nope, I'm pretty tough."

"I believe you." He finally fished a card out of his wallet. "Here's my card. It has my personal number on there. May I have your number?"

She sighed and then nodded. "Hand me your phone."

He unlocked it and handed it to her and smiled. "Please don't ghost me."

She gave a soft laugh. "Try it."

He pushed the button and her phone began to buzz in her back pocket.

She pulled it out and held it up.

He nodded in satisfaction. "Well, I guess I'll be on my way, Miss Lily."

"Nice to meet you, Justice," she said softly.

She watched him as he turned and headed out. She went to the door, curious to see what car he drove. It was a dark gray Chevy Tahoe. He wore tan cargo pants, a white knit shirt and a brown leather jacket. He was about six feet or so, same height as Gabe maybe, and looked athletic. He had light brown hair and brown eyes and a very pleasant looking face. Cute, in a manly sort of way. She wondered how old he was and why it was so important to him to buy this place. Of course, that was not gonna happen, because this place was *Lily's Place* and it would remain that way.

He drove away and she lifted the card to see what kind of business he was in.

Senior Assistant VP of Marketing for Pure Foods. Her eyes opened wide. Wow, that's impressive. *Pure Foods* is a go to for the Inn and would be for her own restaurant. She looked closely at the name and then blinked and looked again, making sure she saw what she thought she saw. Justice Sawyer. Sawyer? A Sawyer who drove all the way from Kansas to find this particular building? This home? Could he be related to the original builders and owners of this home? She felt dizzy. Her heart was beating a mile a minute. Could this be possible? She wanted to call Daisy and tell her what had just happened, who she thinks she just met, but there was no time. She had to get home, get changed and get to work.

✞✞✞

January 13th 2:30 PM PST Monday Afternoon
Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge, California

So far, Gabe, Hall and Blade were leading the pack. They made it through the max out on the weights. Gabe, Hall and Blade each made two times their body weight. The others were close behind, averaging in the 315 lb to 335 lb range. Sit ups, crunches, burpees, lunges and more were excellent from all twelve newbie agents, yet Gabe, Hall and Blade made it through a little easier than the others.

Now they were running wind sprints. Gabe wanted to stop. He fought the nausea. He worked through it. He looked beside him and saw Dyal go down. He turned and watched him. He got up on all fours and vomited. Gabe watched to see if he would get back up. Instead he laid down in the dirt. Gabe jogged over to him.

"Tanner, you may not help him," the drill commander yelled.

"I won't, sir," Gabe yelled back.

"He has to do this on his own. You may not touch him."

"I won't touch him sir," Gabe replied. "Unless he pisses me off," he mumbled under his breath.

He bent down over Dyal. "Get up."

"I can't man. I'm done."

"You are not freakin' done! Get up!"

"I can't."

"You say that to me one more time and I'll beat you to a pulp. Now get your butt up. Now. Work through it. Get up."

Hall stopped his run and came to stand over Dyal too. "Get up, man." He kicked him in the thigh. "Get up. You can do this."

"NOW," Gabe yelled. "Right now."

Dyal got back up on his knees and slowly raised himself to stand.

Gabe nodded. "Now, I don't care if you have to stop and throw up ten more times. You will finish this drill. Got it?"

Dyal nodded. "Got it," he mumbled.

Gabe and Hall ran beside him.

"You do not have the option to fail," Gabe said as they ran side by side. "You do not have the option to quit. Sorry. You ended up on my team and my team doesn't quit. Does yours, Agent Hall?"

"No it doesn't. My team doesn't quit. We won't let you quit."

"How do you guys do this?" Dyal asked.

"It gets easier," Gabe said. "I've been there. When Grandmaster Kino was training me he promised that I'd eventually stop throwing up. He was right. You will get past this and it might be hard, but you're gonna be so glad that you stuck it out. You can do this, Dyal."

"I can do this," he muttered.

The three of them finally finished the drill and went to join the others as they stretched. But the drill commander had other ideas.

"Tanner, Hall, line up on the line."

Gabe frowned. He'd had a feeling he was gonna have to do something like this if he stopped to help Dyal. Oh well.

"You will run full speed to the cones. Breathe for ten seconds and run full speed back. If you don't beat your original times, you'll do it again until you do."

Gabe and Hall lined up. The whistle blew. They took off. When they got back, they found that they didn't make their time.

"Line up."

Gabe looked at Hall. "We're gonna do it this time. Push hard."

He nodded.

The whistle blew and they took off. When they got back the rest of the guys were cheering for them. "Go, go, harder, go!"

They crossed the line. The drill commander looked at his stopwatch and nodded. "Good job."

They collapsed in the sand.

"Stretch out."

They rose up and began the stretch routine.

"Now you're making everyone else have to wait on you."

"Sorry, sir," Gabe said.

"Sorry, sir," Hall mumbled.

When they finished their stretch they were allowed some water.

"Okay, grunts, you might remember that it's a mile back to the dorms. You will accomplish that at a run. Do not stop. If you have to throw up, do it while running. Once back at the dorms, shower, dress, clean your shoes, sweep the floor and be ready for chow."

"Yes sir," they all yelled.

✞✞✞

January 13th, 5:00 PM EST Monday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice Sawyer stretched as he woke from an impromptu nap. He'd checked in at the Inn, been driven to his cabin in a golf cart by a beautiful Asian woman named Jodi Appel. She explained that her husband usually drives people around but he's currently teaching a martial arts class. He'd asked her where would be good place to get a healthy meal and she'd claimed that the best place was right here at the Inn. She said, they have

a highly acclaimed chef working with them and ensured him that all of their ingredients are organic, non-GMO, all natural grass fed beef, and all natural dairy, raw and ultra fresh.

So, he got settled in the cabin, which was very nice, homey, comfortable and clean, kind of like the town. He'd taken a long, hot shower, stretched out on the bed and fallen immediately to sleep. It was the best sleep he's gotten in six months. He laid there thinking about his arrival in Pine Forest. It was indeed an amazing little town. It had a vibe. It had a light about it. He actually stood in the house of his ancestors from six generations ago. It was like the sketch he'd seen in the journals. Almost exactly like the sketch. He smiled. The beautiful Lily was a surprise. He was fascinated by her. She looked like an angel. Blond hair, blue eyes, sweet smile, and that voice. The voice of an angel as well.

He'd scared her and she'd almost pulled a gun on him. He chuckled. Good for her. Tough girl. Tough southern girl. He found himself very much looking forward to seeing her for coffee tomorrow morning. He rose and dressed. He was told he could come to dinner anytime between five and seven. He was hungry and didn't want to wait another minute. He grabbed his wallet and key and headed to the main building.

The delicious aromas hit him before he ever got to the giant front porch. A large man smiled widely at him as he came in the front door and came forward with his hand outstretched.

"Hello there! You must be Justice Sawyer."

Justice smiled. "Yes sir. Are you John Appel by any chance?"

"I am indeed. So how do you like the cottage? Everything satisfactory?"

"It's perfect. I took a little power nap and I think it's the best sleep I've had in a very long time."

"People say that a lot here. Well, are you hungry?"

"I am and whatever is on the menu smells delicious."

"Good, we've passed the first test. Please come into the dining room and have a seat. You've come at a good time when it's not so crowded. The Christmas and New Year's crowd all went home and now we have only a few guests at the Inn."

They entered the giant dining room and his eyes got big when he saw the huge table. "Well now, what an amazing table this is," Justice said as he ran his hand over it. "Must be very old."

John laughed. "I'm not quite sure how to take that."

"Oh, no, I meant, like a beautiful antique."

"It's about sixty years old. It was built by the husband of the woman who used to live here. The Inn itself is much older than Maddie was though, it's almost a hundred and sixty years old. Miss Maddie passed last June."

Justice sighed and nodded as he remembered how his life went this past June. He pushed it from his mind. "Well it's a beauty. I thought I'd be sitting at a little table all by myself."

"Oh no, not here at the *Pine Forest Inn.* We're a family and treat everyone else as such." John gestured toward the two women already sitting and eating. "This is Mrs.

Arlan and her daughter Miss Kate."

Justice nodded at the woman and the daughter who was also a grown woman. He would guess their ages as fifty and thirty.

"Hello," Justice said. "Nice to meet you." He took a seat.

John leaned over. "Since there's only a few guests at the Inn right now, we are allowing our young daughter to get some practice waiting tables. She'll take your order and get your beverage. She'll be right out."

Justice nodded. "That will be fine."

"So, Mr. Sawyer..."

"Please, call me Justice."

"Justice it is. By the way, that's a pretty cool name."

"Thanks."

"So, Justice, you wouldn't happen to be kin to Nolan Sawyer?"

"Nolan? No, sorry, I don't know a Nolan Sawyer."

John nodded. "I guess Sawyer is a pretty common name."

Justice nodded. "Does he live here in Pine Forest?"

"Yes, he just moved here from Tennessee. He's starting a ranch. So, anyway, our entrees tonight are *Moroccan Apricot Chicken*, or *Pan-Seared Salmon with Kale and Apple Salad*. And of course, there is always a delicious rib eye or strip steak from our own ranch next door, grass fed, no antibiotics."

"Wow, it all sounds good."

"I'm loving the salmon," Mrs. Arlan chirped in.

"And I'm loving the apricot chicken," her daughter said.

Little Hannah Brown came out of the kitchen and smiled at Justice. "Hello Mr. Sawyer. I'm Hannah and I'll be your server today."

"Well, hello there Hannah. I didn't expect for you to be so young."

She frowned. "I'm thirteen."

"Oh! Well, I suppose I'm a bad judge of age."

"No, that's okay. I look younger. What can I get you to drink today? We have cucumber infused water, plain water which is well water and very good for you, lemonade, all the sodas, raw milk, raw chocolate milk, that's my favorite, or something stronger, which my dad will get for you."

Hannah beamed up at her father and John smiled back at Hannah.

Justice nodded. "How about a glass of plain ol' good for me water, and a lemonade on the side?"

"Yes sir. I'll be right back."

"Cute kid. You must be proud," Justice said to John.

"Proud, yes and happy to see her coming out of her shell. She's my foster daughter and she's been through a hard time, but we love her like our own and hope to keep her forever."

"Interesting. Would love to hear that story."

"Well then, stick around long enough, and maybe we'll find some time to talk," John offered.

"I intend to stick around until I accomplish my goal."

"Well, that too sounds like a story," John said. Of course he knew that the young man was here to buy Lily's house from her. He knew that Justice didn't yet know that Lily was the owner. He also didn't know that Lily was his chef tonight, but he would know that little piece of information before the evening ended.

Hannah came back with Justice's beverages. She held a pad and pen in her hand and placed a laminated picture in front of Justice. "Mr. Sawyer, tonight's entrees are *Moroccan Apricot Chicken*," she reached over and turned the picture over, "or *Pan-Seared Salmon with Kale and Apple Salad*. Which one do you think you'd like?"

Justice looked closely at both pictures, and smiled up at John. "I don't suppose I could have some of both? I'm a bit of a foodie."

Hannah looked up at John. He nodded at her.

"Of course, sir. I'll be back shortly," she said politely.

Justice smiled. "Mr. Appel, while I wait, will you sit and tell me a little bit about Pine Forest?"

John pulled out a chair and took a seat. "I'd be happy to do that. What would you like to know?"

"How long have you lived here?"

"Almost twenty-three years."

"So, you weren't born here?"

"No. I was born in California."

"Oh, well, that's a long way to come."

John nodded. "My wife, Jodi and I, we wanted to leave the corporate world and the opportunity to come out here and make a new start with our own businesses was too good to pass up."

"So you own this place?"

"We're part owners with Lisa Stewart, who lives with her husband down the street on the Stewart Ranch. That's where we get the beef. But we not only own this place, but the Inn being built in town on College Street, and four more in the southeast, though this is the only one that we run personally. We love it here."

"Your wife said you teach martial arts?"

"Yes. I own a string of martial arts studios."

"I saw one on Main Street. So, how did you team up with Lisa Stewart?"

"She used to work in that corporate world in Cali. She came home to Pine Forest to visit her grandmother, who lived here in this big old place by herself because her husband had passed away. Maddie Lewis."

"She's the one this table was built for?"

"Right. And Lisa used to be the VP of *Golden Hotels* and had it in her blood and transformed an old farm house into this amazing Inn."

"Well done," Justice murmured. "And you have the one daughter?"

"No. We have a son. Jake is twenty-two. He's a Marine Raider."

"Wow, very cool."

John smiled proudly. "He's walking in my shoes."

"You were a Raider?"

"That's right. He's deployed right now, in Afghanistan."

"Hmm, I thought we pulled out of there."

"We did. Some didn't make it. He's there evacuating the ones who got stranded in the melee."

"You must be very proud. I mean, a Raider is special forces, right? That's difficult to achieve."

"I am indeed proud of Jake. He's the youngest Marine Raider on record." He smiled. "But enough about me. Tell me about you. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Kansas. I'm the Senior Assistant VP in charge of Marketing for Pure Foods."

"Ahh, Pure Foods. No wonder you claim to be a foodie."

Justice smiled. "I am always in search of a good healthy meal, especially when I'm traveling."

"Assistant VP," John said with approval. "That's pretty high up. May I ask how old you are?"

"I'm twenty-seven."

"Wow, so, that's pretty young to have achieved that high of a position."

Justice smiled. "Well, it's the family business. I was sort of a shoe-in. Though I do work hard and I do love the company. We try to do it right."

John nodded again. "So, now you're off on a little vacation?"

"Of sorts. I'm, uh, doing some research into this area. I'm into history, you could say, and Pine Forest intrigues me."

"Well, we're so glad you chose to come."

Hannah pushed her way through the swinging doors at that moment holding homemade bread on a cutting board with a ramekin filled with fresh raw butter. She placed it down on the table in front of Justice with a sweet smile on her face. Then turned and went back to the kitchen.

Justice cut a piece of bread and buttered it and set it down. John watched him as he bowed his head briefly and then looked up.

John smiled.

Hannah returned with two plates, and set them down in front of Justice.

John nodded at her.

She drew a breath. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

Justice smiled at the young girl. "No, I'm good. Hannah, you've done a wonderful job serving me. Thank you so much."

She smiled. "You're welcome. I hope you enjoy it. We have the best chef in the world."

"It looks amazing," he said as he took a bite of the bread.

John rose. "Well, I'll leave you to it. I have some wood to bring in so we can have a cozy fire tonight."

Justice stood quickly. "It was a pleasure chatting with you Mr. Appel."

"You as well. Hope to talk more with you later."

"I'm looking forward to it." He sat down and dug in and struck up a conversation with the two ladies at the table.

"I didn't mean to be ignoring you ladies. I was just curious about this place."

"Oh, that's no problem," Kate said. "We listened to your conversation and found it intriguing. Tell us all about yourself."

He smiled. "I'm boring. Tell me all about yourselves. Where are you from? Why are you here at this time of year?"

The women began to talk and it kept his mind occupied while he devoured his meal. He simply smiled and nodded his head and urged them on to speak. They obviously had a story themselves to tell. Everybody did. He was always interested. They finally talked themselves out and excused themselves. They wanted to go into town to check out the entertainment at *The Ritz*, a cocktail lounge in town.

It seemed the moment he finished his meal, Mrs. Appel, Jodi, he remembered, came to take his plate. "Did you enjoy your meal?"

He smiled. "You know, I love to eat good food. I've been in hundreds of fine dining restaurants, but that might be the tastiest meal I've ever had. It was exquisitely seasoned. Perfectly cooked. You get five-stars from me."

Jodi smiled. "We love to hear that. So, Justice, we have lemony yogurt butter pound cake, which is warm and buttery and delicious, or the chef's special angel food cake with organic home grown blueberry compote and fresh raw whipped cream, and of course, we have homemade ice cream."

His eyes opened wide. "Well, I was gonna say I've already overeaten, but that sounds too good to pass up."

"Which one?" Jodi asked.

"I'll go with the angel food cake."

"Wonderful. Be right back."

It took her only a minute to return with the beautifully plated desert.

"Oh man, this looks amazing," he said again, and took a bite. "So good," he murmured. It didn't take him long to finish and again, Mrs. Jodi Appel appeared just as he did."

"Mrs. Appel," he began.

"Call me Jodi."

He nodded. "Jodi, I have to say, that was the best meal I've had in a very long time. As a matter of fact, I can't remember enjoying a meal more. My compliments to the chef."

"Thank you, she's a gem. She learned how to cook from Miss Maddie who was an amazing chef. Miss Maddie had several writeups in the big magazines. She handed all of her recipes and knowledge down to our young chef who is freshly graduated from culinary school."

"Would it be possible to meet her? Does she have time to step out of the kitchen, because I would love to tell her in person just how much I have enjoyed her creations."

Jodi smiled sweetly. "Of course she has time to step out. We had a very small crowd this evening, though we *are* expecting some locals to come to eat in about thirty

minutes."

He nodded. "Well, I would love to meet her."

"I'll go get her," Jodi said and headed into the kitchen.

"Okay, girl, you're on," Jodi said when she closed the door of the kitchen. "He's asking to meet the chef."

Lily twisted her hands together and drew a deep breath. "Oh, Aunt Jodi, how do I look? Do I look okay?"

Jodi giggled. "Hmm, you look like a woman who just finished cooking a ten course meal."

Lily frowned. "Great."

"Go. You started this. You have to finish it."

Lily, looked into the mirror on the back wall, pushed some wisps of hair off her forehead, made sure there was no flour on her cheek, pasted a smile on her face and went out.

He turned in his chair to see if it was the chef who came out of the swinging doors and frowned as she approached. "Lily?"

She smiled. "Hello Justice."

"You're the chef?"

She nodded. "I am."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No, I'm not kidding."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged. "Well, it felt like it would be too forward to immediately tell a stranger where I work and I thought it would be fun to surprise you. I knew you'd find out because Aunt Jodi always convinces people to stay here to eat. People get a healthy meal at the Inn."

He nodded. "Well, Miss Chef, that was the most enjoyable meal I've had in a long time. It was perfect."

She smiled. "Thank you. I love to cook."

"It shows." He allowed his eyes to roam over her. It looked like she still had on the same jeans, but she wore a white short-sleeved button up shirt and an orange apron with 'The Inn' embroidered across the front. Her amazing white blond hair was still in a braid and she wore a black chef's ball cap, again with 'The Inn' embroidered across the front.

She nodded. "Well, I guess I'd better get back to work."

"Wait," he said quickly. "Can't you take a break, like for just ten minutes? Sit and talk to me for ten minutes. Miss Jodi said you weren't expecting anymore patrons for a while."

She sighed. "Okay, I guess I can spare a few minutes.

He immediately stood and pulled out the chair next to him and ushered her into it. Then he turned his chair sideways so he could look at her.

She smiled nervously. "So, what do want to talk about?"

"You."

She shook her head. “Let’s talk about you instead.”

He smiled. “We’re gonna talk about me tomorrow morning over coffee. Let’s talk about you.”

She shrugged. “Okay, but there’s not much to me.”

“Sure there is. You cook like the head chef in a five star restaurant, you sing like an angel, you dance like a— pro...”

She rolled her eyes.

“... and you design kitchens for people.”

She giggled.

“But let me start with a question,” he went on.

“Okay.”

“What’s your last name?”

“Oh. My last name is Tanner.”

“Tanner? Are you related to Gabe Tanner?”

She nodded with a smile. “He’s my little brother. Well, my not-so-little brother. Why? Do you know him?”

“No. I know of him. Who doesn’t?”

“Right?”

He smiled. “So, you’re one of his five sisters. Interesting.”

“One of his five older sisters. We have two little sisters.”

“Wow. How many kids are there?”

“There are nine. Seven girls, two boys.”

“That sounds like so much fun, to have that many siblings.”

“It is. Especially when Gabe’s around. He’s a trip and when he’s gone, like he is right now, we miss him terribly.”

“I bet. I watched his chat this morning. He’s having quite an adventure.” His brow furrowed. “Ya know what? I think I remember you in one of his longer Sunday livestreams. I think he was doing a church session at your home.”

Lily nodded. “Yeah, he wasn’t feelin’ very good so we decided to bring church to him.”

He smiled, his eyes dancing. “That’s great. I like it. I think you guys are a pretty cool family.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you attend a church here in Pine Forest?”

“Yeah, we usually go to the *Community Church of Christ* on Main Street.”

“I saw it as I came into town.”

“So, I’m guessing since you asked that and since you watch Gabe, that you too are a believer in Jesus?”

“I am. A devout believer. A devout follower. Though I admit, I’ve had some struggles lately.”

“Really? Would you like to talk about it?”

“No. Not yet. We’re not talking about me.”

She sighed. “Fair enough.”

"So, if I recall, Gabe's sisters are twins, right?

"Some of us are."

"And are you?"

"Yes. My twin's name is Daisy."

"Daisy. Cute. Who's older?"

"I am."

"Cool. And do you like living here in Pine Forest?"

"I love it here."

"Would you ever leave?"

She smiled. "Well, never say never, but for now, I can't imagine ever leaving my home where I've been so loved and so happy."

He nodded. "It seems like a really wonderful place to live."

"It is."

"I have to say, Lily, sitting here watching your face as I ask you questions, I'm totally entranced. I can't stop looking at you. It's like I want to think of another question to ask so I can see your eyes as you formulate the answer. I'm truly enjoying watching to see if the question is gonna make you smile or frown. You are intriguing."

She frowned. "I'm not quite sure what to say about that."

He grinned. "It made you frown and yep, *that* was the perfect answer to what I just said. Of course you wouldn't know how to respond, because you're humble and a little shy and modest and don't even understand just how beautiful you are, which makes you even more amazing."

She sighed, because she also didn't know what to say about that.

Knowing he was making her uncomfortable, he decided to change the subject "Soo, are you carrying right now?"

She gave a shy smile. "You're not supposed to ask people that."

He chuckled. "So you are?"

She shook her head. "No, here at the Inn I'm perfectly safe. Uncle John was special forces. Aunt Jodi has a gun nearby and is proficient. My father is special forces. Uncle Chaz is ex-military. I'm good."

"Your father is staying here at the Inn?"

"Oh, no, we live right next door."

"Ahh, that's nice. And who is Uncle Chaz?"

"Chaz Stewart. They are the neighbors who own the Stewart Ranch on the other side." She pointed toward the ranch.

"Cool. And the Stewarts and the Appels are related to you?"

"No. But I've known them almost my whole life. All the kids from the three families call the other's parents Uncle or Aunt."

"A giant family," he said softly.

"Exactly." She smiled. "Our family is huge. So, do you have a large family? Any brothers or sisters?"

He cleared his throat. "That information is coming with coffee."

She sighed. "Well, alrighty then. But really, I guess I'd better get back to work. We

have the *Pine Forest Lady's Book Club* coming for dinner and they should be here soon."

He stood when she stood. "It was very nice talking to you, Lily. Thanks for keeping me company for a bit."

"My pleasure."

"And again, the meal was exquisite."

"I'm glad you liked it. I guess I'll see you at eight in the morning!"

He nodded. "Yes ma'am. See you then."

Smiling, Lily headed back to the kitchen. She sighed. It was a pleasant enough conversation. Simple. Basic. He had her totally intrigued and she couldn't wait to hear his long and personal story. She wondered if possibly he would reconsider and go back on his word. After all, she was a stranger. Though sometimes, people can tell strangers things that they can't tell the people closest to them. Deciding she would go back out and caution him that he'd better come through with his story, she poked her head out, but he was gone. Okay, well, she thought, we'll just see what tomorrow brings.

✞✞✞

January 13th 8:00 PM EST Monday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily came in through the kitchen door and smiled at her sister who was finishing up the dinner dishes.

"Hey, Daisy," Lily said.

Daisy smiled. "Hey yourself."

"Late dinner?"

Daisy nodded. "Yeah, Dad worked late and Mom is tired and so I waited for Dad and sat with him while he ate."

"Such a good daughter," Lily quipped.

Daisy smiled. "Such a good dad. But actually, I wanted some time to talk to him and I wanted to let him know that I'd like to drive up to Tennessee to see Brody play next month. I could tell that he really wants to tag along but he is allowing me to have my freedom."

Lily shook her head. "I'm not buying it. He's probably gonna send an agent to watch over you without you knowing about it."

Daisy giggled. "Probably. Though I think he's more interested in seeing the games than protecting me." She eyed her sister. "Okay, so, Sis, are you gonna just stand there and pretend like you didn't meet someone really important today?"

Lily smiled, her eyes getting wide with excitement. "Nope, I'm not gonna pretend that at all. Some guy walks into my place today and first he says he is looking the place over because he wants to buy it. And I told him it's not for sale and he wants me to put him in touch with the owner. I asked him why he is so interested to buy it and he said it's a long and personal story and I said, 'well I have time'."

Daisy laughed. "Why? I mean, why would you be interested to hear some strange guy's long and personal story?"

"Well, it was like I knew almost immediately that he wasn't just some investor. He

had a connection to the place and I wanted to see what that connection might be. So he said he couldn't tell me right then because he'd been driving all day and was tired and needed to get checked in and then he asked me to have dinner with him."

"Eeew. Some strange guy immediately asks you to dinner?"

"Well, it wasn't really like that. It wasn't like he was some stranger. It was like he was an old friend. That's just the feeling I got. And he's staying at the Inn."

"That part I know because Aunt Jodi told mom and mom told me. And she said his name was Sawyer."

"Right, which totally freaked me out. I mean, Daisy, could it be that he's one of the great, great, great, however many greats, grandchildren of Knox Sawyer who built the house? Wouldn't that be cool? What else could it be? He drove all the way from Kansas to this town to buy that place and his last name is Sawyer. It's too much of a coincidence."

Daisy nodded. "I think you're right. So, when are you gonna let him know that you own the place?"

"I consented to have coffee with him in the morning and he promised he was gonna tell me his long and personal story."

"So, you made a coffee date with a guy you only met today?"

"Yes I did. I mean, he's not gonna pick me up or anything like that. I'm just gonna meet him at *Front Porch* and hear him out."

"Okay. So, what does he look like?"

"He's very handsome. Young. Well-dressed."

"Very handsome? In what way? What does he look like?"

"He has light brown hair, thick and kind of windblown. He has dark eyes, maybe brown, maybe hazel. He has a really nice face."

Daisy sighed. "Nice like who?"

Lily shrugged. "Nice sort of like CJ. Nice like, maybe a young Brad Pitt, or like Chris Hemsworth."

"Uh, that's not nice, Lily, that's hot."

Lily shrugged. "Whatever." She smiled. "Maybe. Anyway, he's about Gabe's height and weight, and very athletic looking."

Daisy smiled. "He sounds dreamy."

Lily giggled. "He kinda is I guess."

"How old is he?"

"He's twenty-seven."

"I can't wait to meet him," Daisy said.

"I'm sure you'll meet him eventually. Although, who knows, after tomorrow and I tell him that I actually own the place and have absolutely no intentions of selling it, he might just go back to Kansas and lick his wounds." Lily sighed. "Well anyway, I'm tired and need to get some sleep. I don't wanna have big bags under my eyes in the morning."

"I'm coming too," Daisy said. "Are you gonna tell dad that you have a coffee date with a stranger in the morning?"

Lily laughed. “Hmm, let me do that right now.”

Daisy waited in the hall as Lily went down and knocked softly on her parent’s bedroom door and poked her head in.

“Hey guys,” Lily whispered so she didn’t wake the babies.

“Hey honey,” her mom said. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. I just wanted to let you guys know that I have a coffee date in the morning at *Front Porch Coffee*.”

Her father looked up. “A date? With a guy?”

Lily frowned. “Yes sir. Is that so hard to believe?”

“No, of course not. Is this date with someone I know, or is it with the guy from Kansas who just drove into town today?”

“Daaddy,” she whined.

He shrugged. “Small town and word travels fast.”

Lily sighed. “Oh how I know. Let me guess the path, Aunt Jodi, Uncle John and straight to you.”

He shook his head. “Nope. Aunt Jodi, Lisa Stewart, your mom to me. There was another chain that went from Jodi, Lisa, Chaz to John to me. It doesn’t really matter. The question is, were you not gonna tell me?”

“Oh, Daddy, of course I absolutely was gonna tell you as soon as I got home. That’s why I came in here.”

Keegan smiled, he never really doubted her. “I heard he gave you his card.”

She nodded and handed it to him. “You can’t keep it. Take a picture of it and give it back to me.”

Keegan did it immediately and handed it back to her, then smiled at her. “Do you want me to check him out?”

“No, unless I go missing,” she joked.

He rolled his eyes. “Sweetie, I can tell you’re pretty excited about this.”

“Yes, I am. A guy comes into town who just might be the great whatever grandson of Knox Sawyer. I’ve been obsessed with the house and the story for like forever. Isn’t it crazy?”

“So, did you ask him if he was related?”

“No. Yes, I mean, sort of, I asked him why he wanted to buy the house, but I didn’t tell him I was the owner.”

Keegan nodded in approval. “Good girl.”

“But he told me the reason was a long and personal story and when I told him I had time to listen to it, we made the coffee date.”

Lizzy spoke up. “Why did you tell him you had time to listen? From what Lisa told me, at that time you didn’t even know he was a Sawyer.”

Lily shook her head. “Wow, I guess Aunt Jodi didn’t leave out any details. But really Mom, I’m not really sure why I said that. It’s like I just felt compelled to listen to his story.”

“Would the fact that he’s an extremely good-looking young man have anything to do with that?”

Lily sighed. “Remind me to smack Aunt Jodi, but, well, to be honest, it didn’t hurt. He’s so cute.”

“Well, at least she didn’t say, ‘hot,’” Keegan put in.

“Oh, he’s hot alright,” Lily said, making her mom giggle.

Keegan shook his head. “Okay, well, anyway, Lily girl, just so you know, I will be tracking you.”

“I’m depending on it.”

Keegan smiled at that.

“I’m gonna go get some sleep. I love you guys.”

Daisy poked her head in. “Me too. Good night!”

“Good night girls,” Keegan and Lizzy both said.

Keegan’s phone buzzed and he glanced at the screen. “Gotta take this downstairs. Good night my angels.” He hurried toward the stairs. “Whatcha got Dalton,” he said as he headed down.

Lily watched him go and frowned. She poked her back in to her mom. “Is Dad gonna be working all night?”

“Well sweetie, I hope not, but there are a lot of cases going on right now though, so it’s possible.”

“Well, then, if you need anything, don’t be afraid to call us.”

“Thank you, baby girls. I won’t be.”

“Good night, Mom.”

“Good night.”

✝✝✝

Habakkuk 1:5

“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.”

Chapter Nine

January 13th 8:55 PM PST Monday Evening
Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

Gabe was so tired his eyes were blurry. He had to squint to look hard at his bed to make sure the blanket was smooth. He looked around the room at the other agents. They were all about ready to fall over. They couldn't wait to pass this nightly inspection and fall into bed. He was sure they'd all sleep like the dead. Looking closely at the floor he called out to Agent Walsh. "Hey, Walsh, there's sand just outside of your locker."

The agent examined the area. "Where?"

Gabe glanced at the time. He grabbed a dirty shirt out of his locker from the laundry bag, poured some water on it and hurried over to wipe up the sand. Walsh watched. "Oh, wow. How did you see that?"

"I think the light was glinting on it from my angle." He hurried back to put the shirt back in his locker when the door opened.

"Attention," Agent Moore yelled.

Gabe tossed the shirt into his foot locker, slammed the lid and stood at the end of his bed.

Commander Edwards walked slowly past each bed, stopping to examine each man. He opened a few of the foot lockers, nodded and shut them. Gabe began to pray he wouldn't open his locker, because he'd just tossed the dirty shirt in there without putting it back in the laundry bag. Everything else was 'pristine.' A word the Commander loved to use.

The Commander stopped to look at Gabe. It seemed he stayed there a long time. Gabe swallowed hard but kept his features neutral.

The Commander turned and walked back to the front. "I understand during drills today that a few of you thought you would take it upon yourselves to break ranks. Agent Hall?"

"Yes sir."

"Would you like to explain to me what you were thinking?"

"Um, well sir, as you said, we are a team, and one of our team was down and I wanted to make sure he made it back."

"I see. Tanner?"

Gabe sighed. "Yes sir."

"Do you have anything to add to that?"

"Well, sir I wouldn't exactly call it breaking rank. We broke one rank to join another, both were parts of our team. I felt like here, on the first day, I couldn't let one of us fail the drill. I felt like I could urge him onward. If I let him fail on this first day, then he probably won't make it. I wasn't willing to let that happen, sir."

"Even though you might receive some kind of punishment?"

Gabe swallowed. "Well sir, I guess I was hoping that what I was doing was worthy enough to *not* receive a punishment."

The Commander nodded. "That's a sweet thought, Tanner, but it's not the case. You disobeyed the drill commander. He told you not to help him."

"I didn't physically help him sir. I just, uh, we just encouraged him sir, and he finally found the strength to get up and finish. It was a win in my book, sir, and for the rest of our team too, and if I need to be punished for it, then so be it."

"I'm glad you're willing to accept the responsibility for your actions, even if you believed you were doing the right thing. Which, I believe you were. However, we always must accept the consequences, correct?"

"Yes sir."

The Commander nodded. "Agent Hall, give me twenty. Agent Tanner, you will give me a hundred."

Nobody said anything but some eyes got wide, including Gabe's.

"Sir, I just want to make sure I heard you correctly. Did you say a hundred?"

He nodded with a smug smile. "I did. After all, in your video this morning you grinned and said everyone knows that twenty pushups is nothing to you. So, Agent Tanner, how does a hundred sound?"

Gabe sighed. "It normally might seem doable, sir, but I'm spent. We maxed today, we did pushups to failure, we carried giant rocks above our heads, so, a hundred sounds like a challenge."

"Good, consider yourself challenged. Now, Agent Dyal, you may join Hall in giving me twenty. Together now."

Everyone counted as Hall, Dyal and Tanner started the pushups together. At twenty Hall and Dyal stood and counted with the others. Gabe kept going strong until he got to sixty. By seventy he began to struggle. By seventy-five his arms were shaking.

"Come on, Gabe," Cader cheered him on. "Find the reserves. You can do it."

Gabe reached.

"Eighty," they all yelled together. "Do it Tanner," a few called out. "Twenty more. Twenty is nothing to you!"

By ninety Gabe was having to stop at the pinnacle and focus and rest. At ninety-five he stopped and laid his cheek on the floor.

They all yelled at him. "Do it Gabe. You know you can do it. Come on. You're too close to quit now."

As they cheered and encouraged, he ground his way through the last five and finally they said what he wanted to hear. "One hundred!" they all cheered and then went right back to attention as Gabe shakily stood and did the same.

The Commander nodded.

Gabe was breathing hard but stood at attention.

"Agent Dyal," the Commander said.

"Yes sir."

"Tell me if you have learned anything from this."

He drew a deep breath. “I have sir.”

“What have you learned?”

“I learned that I do NOT want to be the weak link on my team because it causes others to have to suffer the consequences.”

“Very good. Make the adjustment.”

“Yes sir.”

“Agent Fletcher,” the Commander said.

“Yes sir.”

“What will we be doing tomorrow after breakfast?”

“After breakfast there is a two mile run, then we head to the Aquatics center.”

“Correct. Agent Ritter.”

“Yes sir.”

“What is one of the bigger differences between JETTs and SEaLs.”

“We are usually on land sir, and therefore we will not focus as hard as the SEaLs do on underwater functionality.”

The Commander nodded. “And who are the SEaLs to us?”

“They are an illustrious, distinguished and crucial part of our military whom we love and admire, whose skills are worthy of commendation, sir.”

“Agent Ritter, did you memorize the *entire* manual?”

Gabe gave a soft chuckle under his breath because he’d helped Ritter to memorize as much as he could.

“No, not the entire manual sir, though there are some parts of it that seemed important to memorize.”

The Commander nodded. “Tanner.”

“Yes sir.”

“Did I just hear you laugh?”

Gabe’s eyes opened wide and he blew out a breath. “Oh, um, yes sir. I think I did, though I really didn’t mean to.”

“No, I’m sure you didn’t mean to. Give me two hundred...”

He stopped at the sound of several gasps and looked around to silence them and then went on. “Give me two hundred sit ups. The rest of you don’t have to count. I’m sure Gabe’s honor will keep him honest, won’t it Tanner?”

“Yes sir,” Gabe responded and immediately went to it.

The Commander asked several more questions about the week’s agenda while Gabe finished and finally stood back up, though he felt like he wanted to lie down on the cold hard floor.

The Commander sighed as he looked around one more time. “Let’s test everyone’s honor. If I were to open your foot locker, will I find it pristine? If not I want you to take a step forward.”

Agents Walsh, Holder, Jones and Tanner stepped out.

“Agent Walsh, open your locker.”

He did and the Commander looked in to find a puddle of shampoo in the bottom. “Explain.”

"Sir, right before you came in I was making sure everything was good and lifted it up to clean a smudge of shampoo off the top and I dropped it and cracked the top of the bottle. I didn't have time to clean it up before you came in."

"Give me twenty pushups and make sure it's clean before you go to bed. Wait to do your twenty after I speak to these others."

"Yes sir."

"Agent Holder, open your locker."

He did. The Commander's eyes opened wide. "Holder, do you not know how to fold your clothing?"

"I'm working on it sir. My, uh, my mother always did my laundry and I've discovered that folding clothes is an art form."

The Commander chuckled. "I suppose it is indeed. Get one of your team to teach you before inspection in the morning and it'd better be right. You too will give me twenty."

"Yes sir."

"Agent Jones?"

"Yes sir," he said as he turned and opened his locker.

The Commander looked in and frowned. "What is the problem here?"

Agent Jones frowned. "I, um, thought it was a trick question. I figured there was probably something wrong with it, a grain of sand, a hair, something and I didn't want my honor to be in question."

"Agent Jones, I commend the sentiment. However, I'm pretty straight forward. I don't try to trick you. I simply want you to be the best you can be. Therefore, you will give me twenty and in the future, have more confidence in yourself. Your locker is pristine."

"Thank you, sir."

"Tanner."

"Yes sir," Gabe said as he lifted the lid to his locker.

The Commander looked in and shook his head. "Most everything is in perfect order. Why then is there a shirt and water bottle out of place?"

"Right before you walked in, sir, I saw some sand on the floor. There was no time to go get the broom, so I grabbed a dirty shirt out of my laundry bag and a bottle of water from my shelf, wet the shirt and wiped up the sand. I just finished when someone yelled 'attention' and I tossed the two items into the locker quickly and stood at attention. In hindsight, I should've taken the extra five seconds it would have taken me to shove the shirt back in the laundry bag and place the bottle back on the shelf."

The Commander nodded. "You know what they say about hindsight."

Gabe nodded. "It's 20/20."

"Fix this before you go to bed, and give me two hundred jumping jacks."

Gabe didn't flinch, but only nodded. "Yes sir."

The Commander headed back to the door and turned. "You may begin. Again, Tanner, you can count on your own."

The agents counted for the three doing pushups.

Everyone stood quietly until Gabe finished.

The Commander nodded. “I bid you a good night agents and I will see you at 0600 hours.”

“Good night, sir,” the agents said.

“Tanner. Out in the hall please.” The Commander left the room.

Gabe drew a deep breath and headed out, several of the agents patting him on the shoulder or back as he passed.

Gabe approached Commander Edwards and stood at attention.

“At ease.”

Gabe relaxed.

“So, how am I doing so far?” Edwards asked.

“Sir?”

“You told me to bring it on. Did I bring it?”

“Oh, yes sir. You’re doing a fine job, sir.”

The Commander chuckled. “How are you feeling right now, Tanner?”

“I feel like I’m so tired I might pass out.”

“Good. Do you realize that single-handedly, in a twenty-four hour period, you have brought the red team together as one? They are way past the black or blue teams in bonding. They are learning from you, Gabe, the youngest on the team. They are learning things they don’t even know they are learning. Things like, pushing through, giving one’s all, honor, even compassion and love for another human being.”

Gabe swallowed, trying to keep his emotions at bay.

“Yesterday we had four drop off the blue team and two drop off the black team. Your team is still all there. I hope you realize that I’m not picking on you because I don’t like you. Part of it, like I said, is I was asked to go hard on you. But there is more to it than that. You are a remarkable young man. You fascinate me, Tanner. I’ve never met anyone like you. There’s something about you, so I will keep pushing you hard. Do you understand what I mean?”

Gabe nodded. “I think so sir. It kind of reminds me of a scripture.”

“Which one is that?”

“It’s in Hebrews, chapter twelve verses five and six and it says, ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves.”

The Commander had to work hard to keep his own emotions under control. He cleared his throat. “I thought you were gonna say the one about, ‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.”

Gabe grinned. “That’s another good one. It’s in Isaiah. We quote that to my baby brother a lot.”

“You quote scripture to your baby brother?”

“Yes sir. They comprehend like, the meaning behind it because they’re fresh from God. And we quote him that scripture to him because his name is Isaiah.”

"How old is he?"

"He's six or seven weeks old."

"That is interesting. So, anyway, I'm interested to see how you handle each day, Agent Gabe Tanner."

"Thank you sir. I can only tell you what I promised my father, I will give it my all every single day and I refuse to fail."

The Commander held out his hand. "Good night, Tanner."

Gabe shook it. "Good night, sir."

Gabe headed back in. The room was silent. He headed straight to his locker and fixed it, then knelt by his bed and prayed silently for several minutes. He finally climbed into bed and closed his eyes, but then quickly reached up, grabbed his phone and texted.

~~Hey babe sorry been a hrd day need to slep love u

~ I understand. Keep up the hard work. I have no doubt that you're making a mark. I love you so much. (Heart emoji and kissing emoji.)

Sighing with weariness, Gabe plugged the phone in, set it on his shelf, snuggled down and closed his eyes.

"Night Tanner," one of the guys said.

"Night everybody," Gabe mumbled.

The light went off.

✞✞✞

January 14th 7:55 AM Tuesday Morning

Front Porch Coffee, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily took a deep breath as she looked into the visor mirror in her car. She smoothed some strands of hair. Today, she'd worn her hair down instead of back in the braid she wore when cooking. Brushing at an imaginary smudge under her eye, she looked again, nodded, grabbed her purse and headed in.

She didn't even have to open the door. She could see him watching out the glass door and rush to open it for her.

She smiled brightly. "Good morning!"

He sighed. "Wow. Good morning, Lily."

"Wow?"

He nodded. "I thought, you couldn't possibly be as beautiful as the picture I had of you in my mind since yesterday. I thought I'd just imagined it. But now, you really are just as beautiful as I remembered."

She giggled. "Well thank you. You look just like I remembered you."

"Hey, I changed shirts," he quipped, making her laugh again.

They went to the counter together.

"Hey Lily," the Barista greeted.

"Hey Darrin," she said softly. "I'll have a caramel macchiato."

"And you sir?" Darrin asked.

"I'll just have a small black coffee."

"Name?"

"Sawyer."

Justice paid and they headed to pick up their order at the end of the counter. "Lily, would you like to go find a seat and I'll bring it to you?"

Lily smiled. "Sure. Is it okay with you if we sit outside on the porch?"

"Sure."

"Good. That way we can talk more privately. I'll be on the side porch."

He nodded and watched her walk away, a beautiful sight to see. She wore jeans again, and had on some dark brown insulated muck boots that actually were unsullied. She wore a tan puffer jacket. The most notable difference from yesterday was that her very light blond hair was down and came almost to the small of her back. It was thick and wavy and beautiful.

"Sawyer," a girl called.

Justice turned and smiled and thanked her and grabbed up a large ceramic mug and a smaller one. He stopped to get napkins and headed out.

She looked up at him and smiled as he came and set her coffee in front of her and took his seat.

He watched as she lifted the tan mug and took a sip, her tongue darting out to lick the cream off her upper lip. Fascinating. He cleared his throat and took a sip of his coffee.

"Umm, this is so good," she whispered. "Thank you."

"Thank you," he said.

She smiled.

"So, are you really Lily?" he asked.

Her eyebrows shot up. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you pull a switch with your twin just for fun?"

Lily giggled. "Daisy's hair is shorter than mine and her face is a little slimmer than mine." When he still appeared unconvinced she added, "and she doesn't know the words to 'Last Dance.'"

He chuckled and nodded. "Okay, I'm convinced."

She took a few more sips and placed her cup down. "Okay, Justice Sawyer, I am ready to listen to a very long and personal story as to why you would drive all the way from Kansas on old information to buy an old home in the middle of our tiny town."

He nodded. "Ya know what? I can't believe I agreed to tell you this very long and personal story."

Lily smiled sweetly. "Well, sometimes it's easier to talk to a stranger than it is to talk to someone you're close to and I'm not letting you off."

He nodded, took a large gulp of coffee and set his cup down. "As you know, Pure Foods is my family's business. My great grandfather, Delton Sawyer III, started the business in 1955. It was after World War II and there was a whole lot of entrepreneurship going on. He was a doctor and a nutritionist and he wasn't buying what was being fed to us, literally. It seemed to him like the world was trying to lead people astray as to the importance of what they are putting in their bodies. His dream was to teach people to eat pure, unadulterated foods and to do that, those kinds of foods

had to be provided.

"So, he began with milk, bread and honey. Raw milk. Raw unfiltered honey and whole grains and unbleached flours. I will spare you a history of the brand. One of the things that had him begin this journey was his son, my grandfather, Thomas Sawyer, had an event happen in his life. That's another whole story in itself and I won't go into it today. Let me just say that my great grandfather was directed to feed his son, Thomas, only pure foods."

"Don't mean to interrupt, but just to keep it straight, Thomas is your grandfather?"

"Right. And he had a son and also named him Thomas, so my father is a Thomas Junior."

She nodded. "Got it. Please go on."

"The company grew by leaps and bounds and within thirty years, Pure Foods is the nation's go to for good quality, healthy foods. By 2010 it becomes a billion dollar business."

She nodded. "At the Inn we only use pure foods and *Pure Foods* is one of our major suppliers."

He smiled. "That is wonderful and it makes me happy. Anyway, so, at one point, my grandfather, Thomas, now, don't think this is crazy, but he has visions and dreams and well, all I can call it is 'knowings'." Justice stopped to see if he would lose his audience over that.

Lily smiled sweetly. "I don't think that's crazy at all. My brother gets visions. He had a vision of intense pain in the back of his thigh and being drug across a dirty, rough, wooden floor right before he was shot in the back of his thigh and drug across a rough, wooden floor when he was abducted. And he couldn't have made that up and it happened just like that, so I don't think that's crazy at all. I think that's being in tune with God."

He smiled in relief as he looked deeply into her beautiful blue eyes. He cleared his throat. "Cool. So, my grandfather kept having this vision of an older brick home and he would actually see words or sometimes hear the words, 'you must bring God into this house and the time of heartbreak and suffering and sadness will be broken.' We didn't quite know what it was all about. We hadn't known heartbreak and suffering really. I mean, my grandmother passed away and that was hard, but we'd always been a happy family that was blessed with a wonderful business. We prayed about this, all of us, our whole family, and a few of them got the answer that there was a curse of some sort, or that there were demons trying to end us."

"You say a few, meaning, not you?" Lily asked.

He nodded. "Right. I was thinking that this is all strange. I was more focused on the business. At the time, my father, Thomas, was the CEO of Pure Foods. He was a good man and was happily married to my amazing mother. Her name is Paula. I had an older brother Ethan, who was in charge of marketing. He was the one who decided that I needed to be the face of the company. He said I had the right look, pure and wholesome and healthy. And I was an athlete. I played ball in high school and college, both football and baseball. Even played basketball in high school, so, I looked strong

and healthy. I was dead set against it at first, mostly because he would tease me and call me a pretty boy."

Lily tried very hard to not smile and keep her expression neutral because he was definitely pretty, in a hot sort of way.

"I'm not a model," Justice went on. "Nor did I want to be, but the position allowed me to speak about my dedication to *Pure Foods*, and the importance of pure foods, so I said I would do it. At the same time, my baby sister, Clara, was studying to be a doctor."

Lily decided to ask a question. "So, if you hadn't been tagged as the wholesome face of the company, what were you interested in doing?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. Something to help run *Pure Foods*. I love the company and I love working there. I did have a hobby of looking into old things. Old towns. Old furniture, like antiques. Old cars. The history of things intrigued me. I used to go up into my great grandfather's giant attic and go through things. There was so much stuff up there. It would take years to go through it all. But one day I came across an old chest. It was about five feet by three feet and it was locked. Of course, I couldn't find a key, so I very carefully removed the entire locking mechanism from the chest and looked inside.

"It was full of journals and scrapbooks and a single white dress for a child that was pretty tarnished with age. I took the chest downstairs and asked my grandfather if I could take it home and look through it. Of course, he gave me permission. He said he'd meant to look through that chest many times but then as more things accumulated in the attic, it got pushed farther and farther back into a corner and he'd totally forgotten about it. I promised him that I would let him know what was in the journals."

Justice stopped and took a few more sips of coffee and smiled at Lily. "Am I boring you so far?"

Her eyes wide, she shook her head. "No! I'm on the edge of my seat. What was in the journals?"

He smiled. "Can I get you something else?" he said, motioning toward her empty cup.

"Yes. You can tell me the rest of the story."

He chuckled. "You are very cute, did you know that?"

She rolled her eyes and blushed at the same time.

He drew a deep breath and continued. "Well, the journals turned out to be an accounting of the life of my great great great great great," he counted on his fingers and held up his hand to show 'five'. "Grandfather. His name was..."

"Knox Sawyer," she put in excitedly.

His eyes opened wide.

"I'm sorry. Am I right?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"That too is a long story. But you keep going. I am so excited that I think I might burst."

"Okay, I'll go on, but now you have me intrigued as well. Sooo, Knox was born

in...” He stopped. “Do you know?”

She grinned. “1800 in a rural area of Pine County, Georgia!”

He nodded. “Right. He was the first...” He stopped and looked at her.

“Mayor of Pine Forest!” she gushed.

He chuckled. “Interesting. Anyway, in the journals, Knox wrote about his love for his wife...”

“Birdie,” she said quickly.

He nodded. “Bernice, but he called her Birdie. He wrote about his love for his children. He wrote about the building of his home in Pine Forest. The man who did the brickwork on his house and on the most of the buildings of Pine Forest was a man named Henry Halford. He was a devout Christian and he told Knox many times that he always blessed the buildings that he worked on. Knox met him at the University of Georgia in the early 1820's. They became the closest of friends. Henry agreed to come back to Pine Forest with him and they were gonna make amazing things happen. With Knox’s business and political aspirations and Henry’s artistic masonry talents, together they practically built this town from scratch. They were riding high.

“Henry found a girl and married, but didn’t stick around Pine Forest because he was being asked to help design buildings all over the southeast. They kept in touch through letters and those letters were stuck inside the journals. Henry never stopped trying to help Knox see the light, meaning, the light of Jesus, but Knox’s life was too good, and he had no reason to reach for God. I mean, that’s what he wrote in his later journals. He was living a dream. Wealth, acclaim, lavish parties, but then tragedy struck.”

Lily nodded as her eyes filled with tears. “I know that part of the story well, and it always makes me cry so let’s not go over that right now.”

“Again, interesting. I mean, did you have to do a report on the history of Pine Forest when you were in school?”

Lily shook her head. “No, but you know what? That should have been an assignment for every single student in Pine Forest. But no, I didn’t, but my interest in the Sawyers is my story and will be told at another time,” she asserted, copying what he said to her the previous night.

He smiled. “Yes ma’am. Okay, so, skipping the tragic details, in the journals, near the end of Knox’s sad life, he wrote about discovering that what his friend had insisted was true, actually *was* the truth. Knox had mocked and scoffed at him. Knox had told him to keep his religious views to himself.”

“What was the truth his friend insisted on?” Lily asked.

“That God is real. That Jesus was the only begotten Son of the Father. He was the true Son of God. He was real and His gift of the cross was real and if we believe in Him, we will have eternal life with our loved ones. You see, Knox wrote about how he’d gone away to college to learn about real life, about science and philosophy and literature and not about God and the Bible. He came home with his education and his political aspirations and became rich and prominent. But in his latter years, he realized the real truth was what would have actually brought him lasting, true happiness. Now

his wife was gone. His beautiful children were gone. Most of them anyway. And he had no one to blame but the hardness of his own heart. He wanted to curse God, but in order to do that, he'd have to believe in Him, and that was the crux of the matter. His heartbreak is evident in the things he wrote in the journals right before he died and will bring you to tears, so maybe you shouldn't ever read them."

He shrugged. "But I only know that now. I wasn't the one to read them first. It was my sister, Clara. She was completely absorbed in the journals. Then she brought my brother Ethan into the fold and they became obsessed. Then my parents became involved. They were so obsessed with those journals. They said they believed it was their calling to read those journals, trace our heritage and find our roots. They said granddad's vision about ending the curse was real and true and important. Ultra important.

"But I was like Knox in a way. Well, not exactly like him. I knew God, I loved Jesus, but I didn't feel the obsession with the journals and then with this house that they all felt. I was busy working to make Pure Foods the top seller of healthy foods. It was because of my grandfather that I finally agreed to come here with my parents and siblings and buy the house and bless the house."

Lily blinked slowly. "Because of your grandfather? Because you had so much respect for him?"

"Yes, that of course, but also, because he's, well, he's special. My grandfather is a tower of strength spiritually because he had something amazing happen to him back when he was a boy. And THAT, is again, a long story for another day."

Lily gave a soft laugh. "Looks like we're gonna have to have a few more coffee dates to talk about everything."

He smiled and nodded. "I would be very open to that."

She shook her head. "Oh my goodness, I can't believe I was so forward to say that, I mean..."

"It wasn't forward, it was logical and I was gonna say the exact same thing." He took a deep breath. "Anyway, my grandfather was adamant that I come here with the family. 'We all should come here,' he said. He said the house must be filled with God to break the curse and because of that I agreed to go with my family. My grandfather was going to join us a few days later because he had promised to officiate a dear friend's wedding. I was having a bad attitude. I didn't want to go. I kept trying to get out of it. I'm not sure why I felt so strongly about it. I suggested that I at least stay behind with Granddad and accompany him on the flight to Atlanta in a few days. My father thought that might be a good idea. So I stayed behind."

Justice stopped and shook his head. "That was back last June. My family, father, mother, brother and sister, left on a private jet on June 14th. It was a Friday. It was the last time I saw them alive."

Lily gasped. His hand had fisted on the table and instinctively, she reached out and covered it with her hand.

Justice fought through the emotions that welled up, his voice cracking. "The plane went down in a sudden supercell thunderstorm. There were no survivors." He drew a

deep breath.

Lily felt like she should remain quiet and did so. She had no words anyway.

He cleared his throat. “Since that time, I’ve been lost. Totally lost. I thought that if I gathered all the journals and all the research my brother and sister had accumulated and began to study, I would some how be comforted. What I became though, was driven. I was driven to finish what they started. They were coming here to find the house that Knox Sawyer had built, to claim that house, to restore that house and to fill it with light and prayers and the Spirit of God and I’m here to do that very thing. To finish what they believed had to be done.

“My family and I, we were close. Very close. There was so much love. And we loved the Lord. We felt so close to Him. We were so close to each other and though I believe in the resurrection and that I’ll see them again, it has been devastating, and I found that trying to get over it has been impossible. My grandfather too, was broken, but he said we have to walk the walk. Do we believe in the Gift of Jesus or don’t we? He believes. His faith is so strong. But I have floundered. So I came here to find myself as well. To see why it was so important to come here. To see why the enemy fought so hard to keep my family from coming here. What’s so special about Pine Forest? What’s so special about this old house? Why can I not feel the Holy Spirit like I used to? It’s not like I’ve turned my back on God. I’m not bitter. I get it. I know bad things happen and there is a plan and still, I’ve felt so lost.”

He stopped and drew a deep breath and focused his eyes on the bright blue eyes in front of him that were currently filled with unshed tears. “And so, sweet Lily Tanner, who seems so touched by a stranger’s story, that is why I was looking around and checking out the house.” He gazed at her. There seemed to be a light coming from her face. It seemed she glowed. His eyes zeroed in on her lips as she began to form words.

“Justice, I am so very sorry for your loss. I understand your pain. This past year, we thought we lost Gabe, and later we thought we were gonna lose our mother. It’s not the same I know, but there was a time we thought they both were gone and the loss is so great you can’t put it into words. I’m so sorry, Justice. I know words don’t help. I know that. But I hurt for you. I can’t help it.” She blinked and a tear ran over her cheek.

His eyes followed the track of the tear. Instinctively, he reached up and brushed it away with his thumb. “I’m sorry. My intention was not to make you cry. I only wanted you to understand why I’m here and what my mission is. I’m actually surprised at myself for telling a stranger the most deeply personal story of my life. I suppose it was because you were the first person I spoke to in Pine Forest. You were in the house and you were singing a song about last dances and last chances for love and it just seemed like I should share my story with you. I hope it wasn’t too much. I don’t mean to place any weight on your shoulders.”

“I don’t mind. My shoulders are pretty strong. I’m glad you felt like you could share your story with me. I hurt for you and I want to help you. It makes me want to make your pain go away.”

He blinked at her bold words. She was obviously a loving and compassionate young woman and he would take advantage of that. “So, if you want to help me, does

that mean you'll tell me who owns the house so that I can talk to them?"

She frowned. "I was going to tell you anyway because I know that you can simply go to the county clerk's office and find out on your own. So it won't be a secret much longer anyway and I'd rather you hear it from me."

"Okay. I'm listening."

She shivered. "Well, telling you who owns the house is also a bit of a personal story and I'm getting chilled out here."

Justice immediately looked at his weather app. "It's 48º. I'm sorry. That was very inconsiderate of me. It's much colder than this in Kansas so it feels warm to me and I didn't think about you being cold." He rose and gathered their cups. "Would you like something else?"

She shook her head.

"Have you had breakfast?" he asked.

"No. Have you?"

"No, and I am hungry."

She frowned. "The *Church Street Diner* is just down the street. We could go eat some breakfast."

He nodded. "Okay. Let's go there. I'll be right back."

He took their cups back into the coffee house and came back quickly.

She smiled at him. "It's not very far. Let's just walk."

He smiled. "You're not too cold?"

She shook her head. "The walk will warm me up."

He stopped her on the sidewalk with his hands on her shoulders, then grabbed the bottom edge of her coat and zipped it up for her snug under her chin.

She laughed. "I guess that makes sense."

✝✝✝

January 14th 6:00 AM PST Tuesday Morning

Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

Gabe finished up another set of a hundred pushups. Breathing hard, he stood up. He'd now been through four inspections; Sunday night, Monday morning, Monday night and Tuesday morning, and so far he'd received what the Commander called "incentives" at every inspection. This time it was because he'd accidentally left his cell phone ringer on and it went off as the Commander was speaking. Taylor had tried to call him, probably to check on him since he'd been too tired to call her last night.

"Agent Black."

"Yes sir."

"How many miles are we going to swim this morning?"

"Two miles sir."

"Agent Fletcher, tell me one reason why swimming two miles is much more tiring than running two miles."

"Yes sir, um, water provides much more resistance than air, sir, so that means that your muscles have to work much harder to move through it, which leads to greater fatigue."

"Very good. Agent Holder, give me another reason."

"Full body engagement sir."

"What does that mean?"

Agent Holder cleared his throat. "Well, sir, um like, running primarily uses leg muscles, while swimming engages nearly every muscle group in your body, which expends more energy."

"Good. Agent Moore, give me another reason."

"Breathing challenges, sir."

"Expound."

Agent Moore frowned. He panicked and remained silent.

"Agent Moore, why is breathing a challenge?"

"Sorry sir, I can't remember the exact reason."

"Tanner, help him to figure this out without giving him the answer."

Gabe's eyes opened wide. He had to think fast. How would he explain it to like, his little sister? "Agent Moore," Gabe began. "Um, can you breath when you're under water?"

"No."

"So what is the challenge when you're swimming?"

Moore smiled. "Oh, yes, you have to focus on the timing of breathing when your face is above the surface and you have to hold your breath for short periods of time, which um..." He lowered his head.

Gabe urged him on. "Which puts a strain on..."

Moore lifted his head. "Which puts a strain on the respiratory system and contributes to fatigue."

Commander Edwards nodded. "That's correct. Moore, give me twenty."

They counted as he did twenty pushups.

"Agent Blade, what is one more reason swimming is such a challenge?"

"Heat loss, sir."

"Expound."

"Swimming in water causes a drop in core body temperature which means your body has to burn extra calories to maintain warmth.

"Good. Agent Tanner, sum this up for us please."

Gabe drew a deep breath. "Swimming is more tiring than running because it engages almost every muscle in your body due to water resistance, it requires precise breathing patterns, and leads to heat loss in cooler water, which forces your body to work harder to maintain core temperature; all these things contribute to a higher energy expenditure compared to running, making one feel more exhausted after a swim session."

"Well done, everyone. Get breakfast, get your swim bags and you will line up and run to the Aquatic center. Again, there will be prayer and devotional. Now, an aside, Agents." He looked around sternly.

"We received a complaint from a trainee, not necessarily in this unit, about the prayer and devotional. They wanted to include other religions other than Christianity.

When you applied to be an Ameritech agent you knew this company is a Christian based company. You do not have to be Christian to work here at any level, however, you were told up front that there will be exposure to Christian things, like starting your day out with prayer, devotionals, and scriptures present on the wall in each communal space. You do NOT have to participate, however, we will not change the basis of our company to fit your religious or atheist or agnostic beliefs. We are a privately owned company and we have made our stance clear to you way before you arrived at this facility. If you thought you could come here and strong arm Ameritech into changing its ability to practice our faith as we see fit, then your thinking is skewed, which actually means that you might not fit into what it takes to be an agent. If you have any questions, please see me and I'll set you up with an interview with Chief Commander William Bradshaw. I won't ask you here to step forward publicly, but you may see me confidentially if needs be. Am I understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Any other questions?"

"Yes sir," Gabe said.

"Go ahead."

"Will you be accompanying us to the Aquatic center today?"

"Why do you ask, Tanner?"

"Well sir, I heard a rumor, I guess you could say, that at one time, sir, you were a champion Olympic swimmer."

The agents murmured.

Commander glanced around to silence them. "What was the source of your information, Tanner?"

Gabe smiled. "My father, sir."

"I see." He sighed. "Yes, I will be at the pool today. Any other questions?"

Gabe smiled. "No sir, no questions, but my father told me to ask you to demonstrate a few of your skills when we're at the pool."

Commander Edwards looked around sternly. "Agents, you are dismissed. Get a move on."

Gabe chuckled.

"Tanner," the Commander said as Gabe tried to leave the room.

"Yes sir?"

"Tell your father I will get him for this."

Gabe grinned. "He told me you would say that and he told me to tell you that he's looking forward to it."

Edwards eyes narrowed. "Next time you talk to him, ask him if he thought about the fact that I can take it out on his son."

Gabe sighed and nodded. "Uh, yes sir, I *will* tell him that."

"Good, and let's begin with two hundred jumping jacks before you leave this room. I'll leave you to it. You are on your honor."

Gabe nodded with a frown. "Yes sir."

✝✝✝

Deuteronomy 31:6
"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified
because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you;
he will never leave you nor forsake you."

Chapter Ten

January 14th 9:30 AM Tuesday Morning
Church Street Diner, Pine Forest, Georgia

They walked one block and entered into the diner. It was busy but they found a booth. Lily smiled. "It's nice and warm in here."

Justice nodded. "Smells good too."

"Yeah, it does. Let me warn you though, this place is just old-fashioned southern cooking. Not as healthy as you might be used to."

He nodded. "Guess I'm gonna splurge."

A waitress came and placed silverware and menus on the table and smiled at Lily. "Hey Lily."

Lily smiled. "Hey Trish," Lily said sweetly to Gabe's old girlfriend from tenth grade.

Trish looked at Justice and smiled. "Hey."

Justice nodded. "Hello."

"So what can I get for y'all to drink," she asked.

Justice glanced at Lily. "I'll have some orange juice," Lily said.

"I'll have the same," Justice said. "And some water."

"I'll be right back."

Lily smiled. "That's Gabe's old girlfriend from when he was a sophomore in high school."

"She's cute."

"She's not happy that she let that one get away."

Justice laughed. "I bet."

Trish came back with their drinks and took their order.

"So," Lily began after she left. "I told you that I have a story to tell you and I guess I'd better get started."

He nodded solemnly, fascinated by the brightness of her eyes.

"When I was a little girl..." Lily stopped when her cell phone beeped. She picked up the phone, checked the notification and then turned the phone to airplane mode. "Sorry. I turned it off. Gabe was doing his little mini-sermon. Anyway, when I was a little girl, *Pine Forest Elementary School* was where the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* is now. I suppose you know that it's almost right next door to the old Sawyer home. So all the kids would tell stories about the old house, that it was haunted. That a bunch of people died there of broken hearts and that at night, when you walk by, you can hear people crying and sometimes you can hear children laughing."

His eyebrows raised. "Do you think it's haunted? Do you believe in that kind of stuff?"

"I don't believe that your family's ghosts are haunting the place. But I do know that demons exist. There are dark forces that work very hard against us."

He nodded. "I know that all too well. My grandfather says that those dark forces took out my family."

She nodded with a sigh. "So, the kids were always scared to walk by the house. They'd always run as fast as they can past the house. But I didn't feel that way. I walked very slowly. I felt drawn to the house. I used to go up to the window and peek in. I would walk all around the house and make up stories in my mind of the people who once lived there. And I also thought the building itself, it was really pretty and I thought it would be amazing if it was restored." She stopped and smiled at him.

Justice smiled. "I think it's interesting that I've met a young lady who is drawn to the house of my ancestors."

She nodded. "Me too. I mean, I also think that's interesting." She sighed. "About a month ago, one night, I stood in front of that house with Ricky Kino and told him the story of that house."

"Ricky Kino? The Ricky Kino?"

"Yes. You know, my family and the Kinos are good friends."

"Oh yes, that's right. Why were you with him?"

She shrugged. "I was feeling ill at ease about my life and wanted to go off and pray and meditate but it was night and Gabe stopped me and we had words and my dad said he'd go with me but my mom needed him because the twins were only a few weeks old and so Mr. Kino stepped in and asked if he could accompany me and promised to not interfere unless I was in danger. So he stayed in front of his car while I walked and prayed at the little park that's next to the Center. Then when I joined him at the car I looked over at the house and started telling him about it."

"What did you tell him?"

She sighed. "I told him I'd always been interested in this old house. It draws me for some reason. I'm almost obsessed with it. I told him I love the house but it has a sad story."

"How did you know that?"

"I got Mrs. Epps at the *Pine County Public Library* to help me look into the history. She's not only the librarian but also a historian. She's a jewel."

Justice nodded and waited as Trish set their food down in front of them and asked if they needed anything else. Once she was gone Justice urged Lily on. "I'm interested to hear the sad story to see if it's close to what was in the journals, but first, may I bless the food?"

Lily nodded and was surprised when he reached across the table and took her hand. He prayed softly and kept it brief and gave her hand a squeeze before he released it. She looked up at him, her eyes wide. She'd felt a jolt. Something powerful moved through her.

"Okay, go ahead," he said.

She blinked, trying to remember what she was saying.

He smiled. "You were about to tell me the sad story of the Sawyer house."

She nodded. “Oh yes, sorry. Okay, well, let’s see. Knox Sawyer was born in 1800 right here in Pine County, in a rural area, not in the town of Pine Forest. He had a girl, from a neighboring property that he was sweet on. He wanted to marry her and take care of her. So he went away to school to become something greater than a farmer. He came back and married Birdie and became the first mayor of the town of Pine Forest. He built Birdie a big beautiful house and they were happy. She gave him eleven children. They were prominent people in the town of course but also probably in the county.” She stopped and looked at Justice. “How am I doing so far?”

He nodded. “There are holes to fill in, but so far it’s pretty accurate. Keep going.” He scooped up another forkful of a gravy biscuit and closed his eyes in ecstacy as he chewed.

Lily took a bite of her scrambled eggs and continued. “They had six sons and five daughters. I don’t know their names. They were happy and had a lot of parties at their big house. Then the youngest baby, who was only one year old, and another daughter, who was seven, contracted yellow fever and they both died. Birdie was very distraught and she wasted away. She died a year later. That knocked Knox for a loop. He was inconsolable. He shut himself away and became a drunkard, depending completely on his older daughters to help raise the family. Then one of his daughters met a boy and fell in love and wanted to marry and leave her father, but he wouldn’t allow it. She was so distraught over that, she ended up killing herself.” Lily had been talking fast, trying to plow her way thought the story without getting emotional but she failed. The tears filled her eyes and she took the napkins Justice offered and dabbed at her eyes and then wiped her nose. She smiled. “I’m sorry.”

“Need a break?” Justice asked.

Lily shook her head. “No. Let me just finish.” She drew a breath. “Next, a yellow fever epidemic swept through and all but his four eldest sons died. Shortly thereafter, Knox also died. They say he died of a broken heart, though there is no cause listed on the death certificate. His four remaining sons sold the home, split the money and went their separate ways. They left town and never came back.”

Justice wiped his mouth, took a sip of water and nodded. “It truly is a very sad story.”

“As sad as yours,” Lily said.

He nodded. “So, the curse continues.”

“So, we have to break it,” Lily said.

“We?”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude. Like I said, I’ve always felt so strangely drawn to the house. It feels like I’m part of it.”

Justice sighed. “There are things to fill in for you which I will eventually do. I can tell you right now, the four sons who left Pine Forest were Delton Sawyer, who went to Kansas, Franklin Sawyer who headed to Tennessee, Walter Sawyer who went to Alabama and Harold Sawyer who headed to Mississippi.”

“Delton, Franklin, Walter and Harold,” Lily repeated.

“Correct.” Justice sighed. “So, you telling Ricky Kino that sad story, is that why

he bought the house?"

"I never said he bought the house."

Justice smiled. "Okay, but did he?"

She gave a slight smile. "Let me finish. I told Mr. Kino that I hated seeing the house empty. I also told him I had this idea that the house should be restored and used and filled with happy memories again. He asked me how I would do that. I told him I would make it into a lovely restaurant that served delicious, healthy meals and maybe even my sister Daisy and I would sing for the customers and bring light and love to the place. And so, Justice, for my birthday last month, Ricky Kino bought the house and then gifted it— to me." She looked into his eyes. "The house belongs to me."

His jaw dropped. His eyes opened wide. He sat back and cleared his throat, started to say something, then shook his head.

She waited through a full minute of silence.

Finally, he spoke. "I'm not quite sure what to say."

She sighed. "It probably sounds like I was just playing with you, just to be cute, or even cruel. But I promise you that wasn't it. My father has taught us to not give away personal information about ourselves to just anyone who asks. Especially us girls. So, I didn't tell you right away that I am the owner. I wasn't sure about you. Then, when I saw your name on the card, that it was Sawyer, I got very excited. I thought it was too much of a coincidence that you wanted to buy the house that was built by a Sawyer and not have some connection to the house. I was excited that I had probably met a descendant of Knox Sawyer. And then, after you told me the story today, I knew I had to tell you my connection to the house as well. I swear I wasn't being cruel or funny."

He nodded. "I believe you. You don't seem like the type to be cruel, knowing what I know about your family. I understand you were just being cautious." He sighed. "So then, you, Lily, hold all the cards. You know what I want. I understand your dreams are wrapped up in that place." He stopped and sighed and shook his head. "Lily, I am not going to ask you to sell it to me."

"You're not?"

"How could I? I assume you were there yesterday trying to plan how to restore it and turn it in to your place."

She nodded and giggled. "That's what I was gonna call it."

"What? Your Place?"

She smiled. "Lily's Place. On my birthday last month, everyone gave me gifts with that name or my idea of a logo on it. An apron that said, 'Lily's Place.' a wall plaque that said, 'Lily's Place.' I thought they were all crazy. Then Mr. Kino gave me his gift and I understood. *Lily's Place* will actually become a reality. But really, I can't do it now. How could I interfere with you breaking a generational curse? I don't want any more harm to come to anyone in your family. And Justice, I really want you to be able to heal and overcome the heartache and trauma you've experienced over the past seven months. I'll have to speak to my parents and my sisters too, but..."

"Lily, I can't ask you to sell your dream to me."

"*I* can't ask you to not accomplish what you came here to accomplish."

They both sat there staring into each other's eyes. While they did Trish came to clear their plates and ask if she could get them anything else. When Justice shook his head, she laid the check on the table. Lily looked up and thanked her. Then shifted her eyes back to Justice.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I'm trying to take it all in and I'm silently asking God to show me what is the honorable thing to do, what does He want me to do? What is His will? I'm confused, because, Lily, I cannot take away your dream. You're a beautiful, sweet, daughter of God and I have no desire to cause you any pain."

Her eyes misted. "And I have no desire to see your pain continue. I told you earlier I hurt for you and I want to make your pain go away."

"So, you would sell me the house?"

She nodded. "Yes. There doesn't seem to be any other alternative."

He shook his head. "It doesn't feel right. I can't do that."

Her eyes filled with tears and one fell down her cheek.

He frowned. "I've made you cry again. I'm so sorry."

"No, it's not you. I just feel so much right now, I can't contain it."

"What do you feel?"

"I'm not sure. So much emotion. I feel like I do when the Holy Spirit touches me and fills me to overflowing. But I also feel confused and that yearning I feel sometimes when I'm talking to Jesus."

He nodded. "That's what we need to do. We need to pray about this and find out what Jesus would have us do. I'm as confused as you. I wish my grandfather were here. Last month, on my birthday we prayed together and I knew of a surety that coming here was what I was supposed to do. I've been so focused on this, so now I'm confused."

She smiled. "I really love that you seem like you are close to the Lord just like my family and I are."

Justice smiled. "I love Him with my whole soul. When my family died, I didn't get bitter, I just begged Him to help me and give me peace and tell me what He wants me to do. But I haven't felt His Spirit like I used to since they died. I've been struggling. I've felt broken. That's the only way I could describe it to you. A broken man. Until now," he suddenly said. "I realized as I sat listening to you tell the story, that I felt the Spirit so strong."

"Me too," Lily said. "I felt it so strong when you took my hand and blessed the food."

He shook his head in wonder and gazed at her in silence.

Lily sighed. "So, you said your birthday was last month too?"

He nodded. "Yeah, mine is December 19th, what day is yours?"

She blinked and tears fell over. She sniffed and grabbed several napkins from the little stainless steel napkin holder.

"Lily? Are you okay?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what is happening. *My* birthday is December 19th."

"You are kidding."

"I am not kidding."

They sat in silence again.

"I, uh, I wanna walk," Lily said quickly.

He nodded and tossed a hundred dollar bill on the table for Trish who was probably unhappy that they had taken up so much time at her table. He paid the bill up front, took Lily's arm and led her out, holding the door for her as she went in front under his arm, and then stood back and held the door for an older couple who were on their way inside.

They walked to the corner of Church Street and Hill Street, turned right on Hill and walked up toward Main. They crossed at Main and turned right to walk in front of the *GTCC*, down past the park, stood in front of the Sawyer House and stared up at it. Finally without saying a word, they walked up the steps. Lily dug in her purse and unlocked the door. She pushed and it wouldn't open. Justice put his shoulder against it and lifted up on the knob at the same time and it opened. They stepped inside.

Slowly, they walked through the house stopping to point out good design or speculate what things took place in a particular room. They went upstairs and then up again, into the attic, which they found had once been someone's bedroom.

"Mrs. Epps said this home has been a market and a library and the owners would use the attic as their living quarters," Lily explained.

They walked reverently around the home and ended up sitting on the hardwood floor in the main living space. They sat silently for some time and then Lily broke the silence.

"There is something I wanted to tell you when you told about your family dying in the plane crash."

"Okay."

"You said it was June 14th."

He nodded. "Yes."

"That is both my brother's and Grandmaster Kino's birthday."

Justice turned his head slowly to look at her. He slowly shook his head and sighed. "I feel like those people in that movie way back called 'Close Encounters,' when they look at the mashed potatoes and say, 'this means something.' Because, Lily, there are no such things as coincidences, right? All this means something."

She nodded. "Right." She sighed. "Justice, will you consider coming to dinner at my house tonight? I want you to meet my parents and my siblings and I want us to tell them everything we've told each other today. I know it will be hard to go over it all again, but it will really help me."

He sighed. "If it will help you, of course I'll do it."

She smiled and took out her phone.

"Hey Mom."

"Hello Lily. Your father was just on his way to check on you."

"Why?"

"Because an eight o'clock coffee date shouldn't last until noon."

Lily gasped and held her phone up in front of her. “Oh, Mom, I can’t believe it’s been that long. I had no idea.”

“Keegan, wait,” Lily heard her mother call. “This is her. She’s okay. Time got away from her.”

“Put her on speaker,” she heard her father say.

“Lily?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Do you have anything to say to me?”

“Yoda is my favorite.”

She heard him sigh. “Okay. Are you at the house?”

“Yes sir, and I’m fine. Justice is with me. I was just calling to ask Mom if Justice could come to dinner tonight with the family. We have a lot to tell you and we need your input and maybe we could pray together too.”

Lizzy smiled. “Of course, sweetheart. What would you like me to make?”

“I don’t think it matters. Oh wait,” she said quickly. “Justice, are you allergic to anything?”

He shook his head. “Not a thing.”

“He’s not allergic to anything, so anything you want and I’ll come home and help soon. I’m sorry I let so much time go by. Okay, love you, Mom. You too Daddy. See you soon.”

Justice smiled. “I had no idea we’ve been talking for four hours.”

“Me neither. My dad was on his way to rescue me.”

Justice smiled. Of course the man had no idea what kind of guy he was and was watching out for his daughter. “So, what was that about Yoda?”

She giggled. “If I love my Yoda costume from when I was little, then all is well, but if I hated my Yoda costume then come help I am in trouble.”

He chuckled. “Cute system. Everything about you seems cute. I guess I’d better walk you back to your car, Lily, but before I do, I’m here to bless this home and fill it with light and I feel like I should begin immediately, so, will you pray with me here, before we leave?”

“Absolutely,” she said.

He rose to get on his knees and she did the same right in front of him. He reached out both his hands and she placed her hands gently on his palms. He closed his hands over hers and bowed his head.

“Father God,” he began. “Lily and I first want to say thank you, for this day of discovery and for us having the opportunity to kneel together in this place where my ancestors once lived. Thank you for the gift of both of our families and for what led us to be together in this place at this time. Lord, keep evil far from us and far from this place and protect us from harm. We don’t know where you are leading us Father, but wherever that is, I know I want to go.”

“I do too,” Lily whispered.

He squeezed her hands. “And Lily does too, Father. Protect us and our families, and fill us with the Holy Spirit. We admit, we’re confused about what direction we

should take so we ask for clarity of mind. Let Your light fill this old house and dispel any darkness or evil we pray in the mighty name of Jesus, amen."

They opened their eyes and stared into each other's for several seconds. He sighed and stood. "Let me get you back to your car."

They rose and he lifted his hand to her beautiful face. "Thank you, Lily Tanner, for this amazing morning. I think you are the kindest, calmest, sweetest girl I've ever met." He took her hand. "Come on. Let's get you home so you can cook me another amazing meal."

She laughed and they started out. He was working on closing the door securely when they both heard a loud bang inside the house. He opened the door again and peered inside.

"What was that?" Lily asked behind him.

He walked back inside and saw that the light fixture in the living room area that had been right above their heads a minute ago, was now lying on the floor, the bulbs broken. It had been an old-fashioned wrought iron chandelier with little white globes over each bulb. Now, it was a pile of metal and broken glass.

They stood silently staring at the mess.

"How do you think that happened?" Lily asked.

Justice shook his head. "I don't want to speculate right now. I was trying to close the door pretty hard. Still, I'll tell you what I think later. This might be a bigger battle than I thought."

He ushered her toward the door, and turned abruptly. "I bless this house in the name of the Father, the Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost," he said loudly and closed the door soundly. He took her hand and led her down the steps. "Which way?" he asked.

She pointed to the corner of Main Street and Pine. We need to go back over across Main there, and *Front Porch Coffee* is down one block on Church Street.

They headed to the corner and waited for the light. When the light turned green they took one step off the curb. Justice saw a blur of something coming at them, turned and pushed Lily back up on the curb, making her fall backward and he fell right on top of her. He scrambled to sit up.

"Are you okay?"

The driver of the car that almost hit them pulled over and came to check on them. It was an older woman and she was in tears.

"Oh Lord have mercy, I'm so sorry, are you okay?" she said.

Justice stood and held his hand out to Lily. "Lily, are you okay?"

She stood and rubbed her backside. "I'm okay."

"Oh, Lily," the woman said. "I'm so sorry. I promise you, the light was green. It was so weird. It was red and I was slowing down but then it turned green real quick and I sped up, but then it was red again."

"It's okay, Mrs. Epps. Really. I'm okay."

"I just don't know what to do. I feel so bad."

"Really, Mrs. Epps, I'm okay. Easy mistake. Please don't feel bad." Lily touched

the woman's shoulder.

"Mrs. Epps?" Justice asked. "The librarian?"

Lily nodded, then smiled excitedly at the woman. "Mrs. Epps, you'll never guess who this is."

The woman adjusted her glasses and looked closely at the young man.

Lily smiled. "This is Justice Sawyer, he's the great, great, great, great, great grandson of Knox Sawyer."

The woman put both her hands on her cheeks. "Oh my goodness it just can't be! Really?"

Justice held out his hand. "Really, it's nice to meet you, Mrs. Epps. I understand you provided Lily here with a lot of information on the house there," he said motioning over his shoulder.

"Oh my yes. Lily has always been so interested in that old house." She looked him over. "I suppose it must be wonderful for you to see where your ancestors once lived?"

"Yes ma'am. It's been amazing."

"Well, young people, I'm so sorry about almost hitting you with my car. But I need to run. Will you be okay?"

"Yes ma'am, we're fine," Lily said.

They watched her go back to her car and drive away.

"Well, that was weird," Lily said.

"Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"I think I scraped my knee up, but I'm okay."

He looked down at her jeans and saw a slight tear at the knee and he shook his head.

"Come on, the light's green," Lily said as she grabbed his hand and ran across Main Street.

He walked her to her car in front of the coffee shop. She stood there a few seconds, not sure what to say. They'd shared so much in one day, it felt as if something major had happened.

She unlocked her door and he opened it for her. She turned and looked up at him, her smile bright.

"Can you text me your address?" he asked.

"Oh," she smiled. "We live right next door to the Inn. Just come out of your cottage, head to the main walk and go left. You'll come to a large iron gate. I'll meet you there."

He sighed. "What time shall I meet you there?"

"How about five?"

He nodded. "Sounds good."

She smiled. "Would it be okay if I hug you?"

He smiled and opened his arms. She leaned her head against his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist. He hugged her to him. They stayed in that position for some time. She finally pulled back and smiled.

"Why did you want to hug me?" he asked.

She shrugged. “I’m not sure. It feels like we’ve shared so much of ourselves with each other. It almost feels like we’ve been through some kind of trauma together. I just felt the need to hug you. I’m sorry if it seemed too forward.”

He smiled. “You, beautiful Lily, can be as forward as you want.”

She blushed. He nodded and waited for her to get into her car. He shut the door, tapped the door of the car and stepped back. He watched her start the burnt orange colored Ford Fiesta. It was cute, just like her. She gave a little wave and drove away.

✞✞✞

Ephesians 1:11

“In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according
to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity
with the purpose of his will...”

Chapter Eleven

January 14th 9:20 AM PST Tuesday Morning
Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

The two mile swim had taken Gabe and Agent Hall a little over an hour to finish. Agents Black and Blade came in at about fifty minutes, but swimming was their thing. The other eight came in close to about an hour and a half. They'd all done some active recovery in stretching and walking and now they were drinking electrolyte water and eating high carb protein bars as they chatted. When Commander Edwards walked up to the end of the Olympic size pool, they all got quiet and turned to face the pool.

The Commander took off a terry cloth robe and laid it off to the side. Gabe looked him over. The first time Gabe had seen him, he'd thought he was another agent, albeit a little older than the usual trainees. That didn't surprise Gabe because of agents like Agent Dalton who got a late start in life. The Commander was very fit. Strong, lean, tall. He was more muscular than the Olympic swimmers Gabe had ever seen. He had a very large scar on his chest and another one on his right thigh. He jumped into the pool feet first, went under for about thirty seconds, climbed out and swung his arms around, loosening them up.

He motioned at the drill commander who was sitting on the other side of the pool. "Time me."

"How far ya goin' today, Sam?"

"Let's do 400 meters."

Gabe scrambled to the side of the pool to watch. The rest of the agents followed suit.

"Three, two, one, go!" the drill commander yelled.

After the first down and back Gabe yelled over to the drill commander. "What's he at?"

"He's at forty-eight seconds."

"Wow," Gabe uttered. "I mean, world champion is like, forty-four seconds."

Blade nodded. "Yeah, and he's not even training every day."

"Does anyone know about the scars on his chest and leg?" Dyal asked.

They all shook their heads.

"When the Commander was on the last length the guys were on their feet cheering. He touched and they all looked to the drill commander to give the time.

He looked up. "4:47," he announced with a smile.

The Commander nodded and climbed out. He put on his robe and went to dress. The agents clapped and cheered for him as he left.

The drill instructor got up and came around the pool. "Okay, guys, line up along this blue line."

They lined up along the blue line that ran the length of the pool and was about ten feet away from the edge.

"Go ahead and stretch while I tell you what we're gonna do."

They all began stretching.

"What you're gonna do is get a running start toward the side of the pool there, and dive out as far and as shallow as you can go, freestyle to the far side, climb out and head to the blue line on the far side. Got it?"

"Yes sir."

"It sounds like some of you aren't quite sure."

Gabe looked around at the others, because the instructions seemed simple enough. What was he missing?

"Tanner."

"Yes sir?"

"You looked confused."

"Oh, no sir. I think I understand."

"Demonstrate then."

Gabe sighed.

"Use your eye protection. On the whistle." He blew the whistle.

Gabe took off toward the side of the pool, dove straight out, barely skimming the water, he swam as fast as he could, jumped out of the pool and ran to the far blue line and turned and was ready to go again.

The drill commander nodded. "Good job. The next five in line proceed and join him on the other line. On the whistle."

Blade, Moore, Hall, Holder and Fletcher took off and joined Gabe on the other side.

"Okay. Spread out and go always on my whistle. Both sides will go at the same time. Make sure you don't dive on top of anyone. Don't run into anyone. Use your brains as well as your body. He pointed to the remaining six on the original side. Get ready."

He blew the whistle and Dyal, Jones, Walsh, Ritter, Black and Cader took off. Gabe's side did the same. It was a fun drill. Until they were on number twenty. Gabe was tired and a little dizzy. He focused, literally squinting his eyes and ran full speed again, dove, swam and jumped out. He'd pretty much been the first one out in his group each time. He figured that came from learning to quick start as a shortstop. He noticed some of the others starting slow on both sides. Agent Jones actually had a hard time climbing out of the pool on the last round.

The next time across, Gabe climbed out of the pool went to the blue line and looked to see how far behind the other agents were, when he noticed an agent floating. He took off, dove straight across, grabbed Agent Cader and swam toward the drill commander.

More agents jumped into the water and helped to lift Agent Cader's limp body out of the water while other agents ran to the side and pulled him up and laid him on the side of the pool. Gabe climbed out. Agent Hall was already feeling for a pulse. He

looked up at the drill commander. “He’s breathing.”

The drill commander nodded. “Is his heart beating?”

“Yes sir.”

He nodded again. “Good job. Agent Cader you may sit up.”

They all moaned as they realized they’d been had.

“Tanner, you made it to him in only a few seconds. Good job on being awake and aware. All of you immediately came together to help him. Good job.”

Gabe collapsed on the cement in relief and exhaustion.

“Tanner, you okay?” Hall asked.

He nodded his head. “Cader gave me a freakin’ heart attack.”

They all chuckled.

“Next week agents, it will be much harder. We’ll be working on drown proofing and the basics of lifeguarding,” the drill commander said.

“Are we going to learn to scuba dive?” Blade asked.

“Some of you will. Those who have the will and the aptitude. Scuba is a specialty. We only currently have two *Underwater Search and Recover Teams, USRT,* and those teams only consist of eight members. But we’re growing. Those who are interested can apply when the time comes.”

He clapped his hands. “Okay grunts. You’ve been at it for almost four hours. Get dressed. We’re gonna run back to the cafeteria, grab lunch and then what are going to do, Agent Walsh?”

“Sir, we have Close Quarters Combat.”

“Good. Let’s get a move on.”

✝✝✝

January 14th 4:00 PM EST Tuesday Afternoon

Cottage 1, Pine Forest Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice Sawyer had been on the phone with his Grandfather for the last hour telling him everything that the lovely Lily Tanner had told him and everything that he’d told her. It was the second very long and draining conversation he’d had today, but wouldn’t be the last. He sighed.

“And so, Granddad, you can see how confused I am. I thought I was supposed to come out here, buy the home of our ancestors, restore it, and fill it with God’s light and love. But you understand how I cannot take this sweet girl’s dream from her? It feels like I’m missing something. What is the solution? Do you understand my confusion?”

“I understand it son, but it’s really not that confusing to me. The solution is plain for me to see, and because it’s not plain for you to see yet, I can’t tell you. It would do you no good for me to simply hand it to you. That is not God’s way.”

Justice frowned but remained silent.

“Think carefully what I said had to be done, Justice. Tell me what that was.”

“You said the house had to be filled with God’s light and God’s love.”

“That’s right,” Thomas said, but went no further.

“But how can I do that now?” Justice asked.

“Is there only one way to do that?”

Justice blew out a frustrated breath. “I guess not, since you’re insisting there is another way.”

“It’s right in front of your face, Justice. Just calm your mind and pray about it. I’ll give you a hint. Maybe filling that house with God’s love and light is a means to an end.”

Justice shook his head. “What end? I don’t understand.”

“You will. Stay calm. Don’t be angry or frustrated. Fill your own heart with the love of God. Love and compassion. And get into the Word. The answers are there, son. And— I’m coming down there.”

“You are? Why? There’s nothing you can do.”

“I want to see the house up close. I think you’re gonna need reinforcements. That overhead light fell. A car almost hit you and Lily. That all happened after you prayed inside that home. The demons don’t want to leave. They’re gonna fight you on this and you need power and strength. We’ll work together. It’ll take some fasting and fervent prayers.”

“Granddad, you don’t have to come. The Tanners are good strong warriors for God. I’m sure they will help me.”

“Good, the more, the better, but I’m coming down there.”

Justice frowned. “I don’t want you to fly, Granddad. I can’t lose you too.”

“Don’t worry, son, it’s not my time yet. But to make you feel better, I’ll have Curtis drive me.”

Giving in, Justice sighed. “Okay, so then, when do you think you’ll arrive?”

“Weellll, I have some lose ends to take care here at the office, and it’s a two day drive, so it will probably be next Monday or Tuesday, unless I can get away earlier. I’ll let you know exactly when I know.”

“Okay, let me know and I’ll make you a reservation at the Inn. Would you rather be in the Inn proper or out in one of the cottages?”

“What do you think?” Thomas asked with a chuckle.

Justice thought a moment. “I guess you wanna be inside the Inn where you can commune with people and spread some light,” he said with a smile.

“Exactly.”

“Well, I think you might find that the Appels, who run the Inn, they might be the ones sharing some of their light with you.”

“So be it!”

They ended their conversation and Justice laid his head back on the sofa. He went over everything in his head that had taken place since the moment he arrived in Pine Forest and found that Lily Tanner occupied most of those thoughts. He drifted off to sleep and woke with a start. It was almost five. He ran to the bathroom, washed his face, brushed his teeth, and combed his hair. Noticing a spot on his shirt that he thought was probably some gravy from the sausage gravy biscuit he’d eaten, he quickly changed into a white polo shirt and then deciding to look a little nicer for the parents, he pulled on a sport coat instead of his leather jacket. He headed out.

✝✝✝

Justice saw Lily waiting for him at the gate. He smiled at her as he approached. She opened the cover on a keypad, punched in some numbers and the gate unlocked.

He nodded. "Nice."

She shrugged. "Ameritech Security stuff."

They walked side by side down the large drive toward the house.

He nodded as he looked up at the house. "Nice place too."

Lily smiled. "Thanks. It is. I love it. My dad built it himself. Well, he had Uncle Chaz and Uncle John to help him, and Mr. Stewart, who is Uncle Chaz's little brother and is also the Sheriff of Pine County."

"Well now, that's convenient, huh?"

She giggled. "So, brace yourself. There are a lot of people behind this door."

"Okay, so, before we go in, tell me again."

"My oldest sister Heather and her fiancé Nolan Sawyer. After her is a set of twins, Rose and Violet, Rose's guy is Jericho Jones, Violet's guy is CJ Blackmon. Then there's Daisy and I. Daisy's guy is Brody Smith but he's not here. He had to go back to school."

"And he's the son of Toby Nash and plays baseball for Tennessee."

"Right. Then there would be Gabe, but he's not here because as you know, he's training in California to be a JETT. So after Gabe there is little Iris. She's three and the cutest little sweetheart in the world. And then there are the new twins, Isaiah and Gentian and they are almost two months old. And then of course, my parents. Got it?"

He laughed. "I think so. Let's do this."

She opened the front door and they walked in.

The aromas of food cooking almost made him swoon.

"Smells really good in here."

"I hope you like it. We decided to go Italian, so we made two giant pans of lasagna, salad, garlic bread and triple chocolate layer cake."

"Sounds wonderful," he said as Lily hung up her coat. The foyer then filled up with people who came to greet him.

Lizzy approached first, with a beautiful welcoming smile.

"Justice, it's so nice to meet you," she said, her voice sweet and very similar, he thought, to Lily's. "I'm Lizzy Tanner, Lily's mom."

She held her hand out and he took it gently in his. "Nice to meet you Mrs. Tanner. Wow, I see where she gets it."

Lizzy smiled. "Oh, well, thank you."

"I'm Heather, the oldest of all the kids," she said as she stepped forward and offered her hand.

He nodded. "Hello, Heather."

"And this is my fiancé Nolan Sawyer." Nolan offered his hand.

Justice nodded. "Nolan, nice to meet you. Mr. Appel asked me if I was related to you. Where're you from?"

"I'm from Tennessee."

"Well, we've traced a line over to Tennessee. We'll have to get together and see

if we might be related."

"Oh, that would be cool!" Heather said.

Nolan nodded. "It would be amazing."

The rest stepped forward and introduced themselves with tiny little tidbits to help him remember.

"I'm Rose, I'm the troublemaker."

"I'm Jericho, a special ops firefighter and Rose is my girl."

"I'm Violet, Rose's twin and I play piano."

"I'm CJ, an Ameritech agent and Violet is my girl."

"I'm Daisy, Lily's twin. My guy isn't here, but his name is Brody Smith and he plays baseball for Tennessee."

"And this sweet baby is Iris," Lily said as she put her hand on her little sister's shoulder.

Justice knelt down. "Well, hello there, Iris. Wow. You are so pretty."

"Fank you. You are too."

They all laughed and Justice rolled his eyes.

He rose and turned to the quiet man standing behind his wife. "And you sir, must be Mr. Tanner?"

Keegan nodded and offered his hand. "Justice. Nice to meet you."

"Thank you sir, and you as well." He gestured at all the people he'd just met. You have such a large and wonderful family."

Keegan nodded. "Thank you. I do indeed and I'm grateful every single day. Our oldest son Gabe is away at school right now."

Justice nodded. "That I know because I follow him and listen to his daily devotionals. He's very inspirational and also entertaining."

Lizzy smiled. "He is. And the babies are asleep right now, but they'll wake up before you leave tonight so you'll get to see them."

"Well," Lily said, come in and get comfortable. We'll have dinner first and then we can fill everyone in on what you and I talked about today."

He nodded. "Eating first sounds great to me!"

"Me too," Jericho said.

✝✝✝

Dinner was amazing. Twelve people sat around the large dining room table. They'd actually finished eating several minutes ago, but no one tried to leave the table. Only Iris had wanted to get up from her booster seat and now sat nestled in her father's arms.

They hadn't moved because they were enthralled by the story being told them. They hadn't meant to hear Justice's tale until after dinner, but the conversation had started when CJ asked for a recap of the Knox Sawyer story that Lily had told at her birthday party. The next logical subject was, why was Justice here asking to buy the property and how he was related to Knox Sawyer.

"Well, I am seven generations away from Knox," he replied.

"Seven?" Lily asked. "I thought it was five."

"He's my great, great, great, great, great grandfather, but remember, before the greats start there is my grandfather and my father. So, I am seven generations away and am actually the eighth generation."

"Wow," Rose said.

"Do you know the names of the four brothers who sold the house and left?" Nolan asked.

"Yes, my brother and sister did quite a bit of genealogical research. The four brothers were Delton, Franklin, Walter and Harold. They went to Kansas, Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi respectively."

"Tennessee?" Nolan asked. "Actually, I think I have an Uncle Frank."

"Interesting," Justice said. "Of course Franklin would have been your great, great, great, great grandfather or uncle. Have you done any genealogy for your family?"

"No, but I think my Aunt Jenny likes to do that kind of thing. I think I'll get hold of her and see if she's traced our line."

"Oh, wow, wouldn't it be cool if you and Justice were long lost cousins?" Violet said softly.

"So, Justice," Keegan began. "Why do you want to buy the property?"

"I guess Lily told you that it's a long story."

"Yes, and that's why we're all here."

He nodded. "Did she tell you any of it at all?"

"No, when we asked her to tell us a little she said it was your story to tell."

Justice sat up straight and nodded. "Okay then. So, I guess it began with my grandfather." He went on to tell the whole story, like he did earlier, baring his soul to people he'd just met. Again, when he got to the part about the tragic accident that took out his family, his voice broke a bit. And again when he got to that part the audience audibly gasped. He cleared his throat and moved on because he didn't want to hear condolences or sympathy. That was not why he was here.

"And so, once I told Lily my story, she told me her story, how she came to own the house. She told me her dream of *Lily's Place* and filling the house with good food and song and love, and I realized I couldn't ask her to sell me her dream. I had no right to ask."

His eyes met Keegan's and he thought he saw a nod of approval.

Lily spoke up. "And I have no right to hold onto his ancestral home that he wants to buy and restore and bless and get rid of a generational curse. So of course I would sell it to him."

Lizzy's eyes teared and she patted her hand over her heart.

Daisy smiled.

Rose nodded.

Violet sighed.

The men all sat silently thinking.

Justice drew a breath. "That's how Lily and I were today after we'd shared our stories. We were silent as we tried to digest what was happening. I felt and still feel confused. God's will for me to come here and fill the house with love and the light of

Jesus is good and I want to do His will always, however, how could His will be to take away the dream of this beautiful daughter of God? So, I'm confused and she's confused."

Lily nodded. "I am confused, but I feel strongly that you should do God's will, Justice. There is no way my silly little dream comes before his mission."

"Your dream is not silly. I've experienced your cooking. I've heard you sing, you are gonna be a big hit."

"You've heard her sing?" Lizzy asked.

He smiled. "Oh, yes, well, when I got to town I went to the house and tried the door and it was open and I went in and she was in the kitchen, singing her heart out and it was amazing."

Lily's face turned red. "I was just being silly."

Justice realized he'd embarrassed her. "Oh, Lily, tell them about the birthdays," Justice said, changing the subject.

They all turned to look at Lily. "Well first, he didn't tell you that the day his family died, it was this past June 14th."

Another audible gasp from the table.

"That's Gabe's birthday," Rose whispered to Nolan.

"And Grandmaster Kino's birthday," Keegan said.

"But there's more," Lily said. "Justice's birthday is... wait for it... his birthday is December 19th."

"Are you kidding me?" Daisy said loudly, startling Iris.

"Sorry, baby girl," Daisy purred sweetly to her sister.

At the same time, the baby monitor sounded.

"I'll go get the babies," Lily volunteered. "Justice come help me."

His eyes got wide, but he followed her.

Keegan nodded. "The rest of us, let's clear our places and clean up the kitchen and meet in the den."

They went to work.

Upstairs, Lily lifted Gentian out of her crib. Justice watched as her sure hands gently lay the baby down on her parent's bed and quickly changed her diaper, then gave her a kiss and handed her to Justice. "Here, hold her."

"Um, like this?" he asked.

Lily giggled. "She won't break. And her neck is strong now, so she can hold her head up. Just hold her against your chest. Yes, like that. Perfect."

He watched as she tended to Isaiah, kissed his cheek and cuddled him close. "You look like a pro taking care of babies," he said.

She smiled. "I help mom a lot. We all do. We're all getting pretty good at it. Even Gabe. Let's go."

They headed downstairs and went straight to the large den.

"Here ya go Mom. Gentian is the one who was crying."

Lizzy took the baby from Justice and greeted her with kisses and then discreetly put her under the light blanket that was on her shoulder and began to nurse her.

Justice was curious, but looked away so as not to intrude on the private though beautiful scene of a mother nursing her child. Not that he could see anything other than a blanket, still he knew what was taking place.

"I'll take Isaiah," Keegan said, gently taking his son into his arms.

"Everyone sit down," Lizzy ordered. "We still have a lot to talk about."

"Where were we?" Justice asked.

It was Jericho who answered. "I believe you were telling us how confused you are and you don't know how to fulfill your mission to bring God's light and love into that house."

Justice nodded. "Yes, because I can't take away Lily's dream."

"And she can't stand in the way of your mission," Rose added.

"Right. So, we're confused."

"Well to me, the answer is..."

"Wait, Jericho," Keegan said. "Don't tell them."

"Don't tell us what?" Lily asked.

"Don't tell you the answer." He sighed. "Lily, Justice, the answer to your dilemma is right in front of your faces, but if you don't see it yet, it would only mess things up to have us tell you. You need to pray and calm your minds and see things logically. And when you realize the answer, you'll understand why we can't tell you."

"That is the same thing my grandfather said," Justice said. "He said almost the exact same words. He said it was right in front of my face. He gave me a hint, that finding this house and bringing it God's light very well might just be a means to an end."

Keegan smiled. "I agree with him. Tell me about your grandfather. He sounds like good man."

Justice nodded. "Oh, my granddad," Justice said, trying to control his emotions. "He's the best. His name is Thomas. My father was Thomas Junior."

"Wait," Rose said. "Thomas? Tom? Tom Sawyer?"

Justice chuckled. "Right? What were his parents thinking? We've teased him about it all of our lives. Silly name or not, he's a great man. He's very spiritual. Very faithful. And that is because he had an amazing, very special thing happen to him when he was just a boy."

"What happened to him?" Lizzy asked.

"Well, when he was just a boy out in the wheat fields of Kansas he and his mother, my great grandmother Lilian, were running in from the fields. His father was actually the town doctor, but they also had a large farm. Anyway, a big storm had come up on them. His mother had the baby with her, Catherine, who was seven months old, and she'd gone out to tell Thomas to come in out of the fields and get into the basement. He was outrunning his mother and stopped to help her. He told her to let him take the baby. She let him because she knew he could outrun her. So, he took the baby. They were running to safety, but Thomas tripped and fell down in a ditch. The wind had picked up so bad his mother couldn't even see that they'd fallen. She would later tell that she'd thought for sure they were so far ahead of her that she just couldn't see them through

the wind and rain.

"But that wasn't what happened. He'd fallen in the ditch and scooped up his baby sister and ran and tried to catch up, but the wind got too strong. It was a twister and he and the baby were sucked up inside like something out of the *Wizard of Oz.* He says he tried so hard to hold onto Catherine. He called her Caty. But the wind tore her from his arms. He says it felt like someone pulled his fingers away from her and literally took her out of his arms. He was positive that Caty was dead, and he knew that he too was about to die. He couldn't breath. He couldn't suck air into his lungs."

"Oh my goodness," Violet exclaimed.

Iris suddenly climbed down off of CJ's lap and ran to Justice and held her arms out to him. He pulled her into his lap and hugged her.

Lily felt such a warmth run through her at that. Iris felt the need to comfort Justice, and he didn't hesitate to comfort Iris. Lily's heart took a bit of tumble.

Justice smiled at Iris. "Don't worry, sweetie, it all turns out good in the end." He looked up at everyone's gaze. "Anyway, young Thomas, my grandfather, was thrown down into a deep muddy ditch and he had no idea where the baby was. He couldn't believe he'd made it out of the twister alive, but felt immense remorse and despair that his little baby sister was probably dead. He cried over her and was so distraught over her that at first, he didn't even realize that his leg was broken.

He found out when he tried to stand. He cried out in great pain and fell down again in the mud. He lay there for some time and realized he couldn't see anything because he was in the middle of a wheat field and the wheat was very tall at that time of year. He said he tried again to stand, and made it, keeping his weight off his leg and he tried hopping to get out of the wheat field, but he kept falling and he was in excruciating pain. He waited a while for the pain to ease and then instead of standing and hopping, he tried to simply pull himself along the ground.

Then he discovered another problem. He had no idea where he was in the wheat field. He could be right next to a prairie strip, or he could be acres away from it. He really needed to get out of the field."

"What's a prairie strip?" Violet asked.

"Oh, it's just a field border, a strip of unplanted land that runs between fields to give us access. Just a barrier."

They all nodded.

"Anyway, Granddad knew he needed to get out of the field somehow, so he kept pulling himself on his belly through the field, hoping he'd get to a prairie strip. He was exhausted and in so much pain and after hours of trying to get out of the field, he actually passed out from exhaustion. The next time he opened his eyes, it was the middle of the night. He was still wet and slightly chilled even though it was the middle of June.

"He said he woke and looked up and watched the stars and doing that was what reminded him to pray. So, he started praying and asking God to help him. Begging God to help him. Then he'd think of Caty and thought he had no right to ask God to help him. Caty was only seven months old and she had his heart. Granddad said the pain in

his heart matched the pain in his leg. He was thirsty and hungry and chilled and miserable and he continued to beg God to help him until he fell asleep.

"When he woke again it was morning. He lay there in his misery realizing he was going to die too. Then he remembered he'd had a dream. A man had spoken to him in his dream. He couldn't remember everything the man said. Actually, he couldn't remember anything the man said except for one sentence. 'Don't stop praying.' So, he continued his prayers. He said over the course of the day and into the next night, his prayers began to change from begging God to help him or save him, to please just take away the pain, because he'd begun to spasm and cramp.

His prayers changed again from asking for relief from the pain to simply asking God to take him. He finally let go completely. He asked God to forgive him for the things he'd done wrong, like smarting off to his mother, or breaking the window, and mostly for letting go of his sister. He cried and cried until he had no more tears. Finally, many hours into the second night he said, 'Jesus, I don't know what you want me to do, but whatever it is, I'll do it. If you want me to be in pain, then I accept it. If you want me to die, I accept it. If you want me to live with the pain of the loss of my sister, I accept it. Just say you forgive me. I'll do whatever you want." Justice smiled. "Of course, he was only ten at the time and he didn't say it exactly like that, but in essence that's what he said. He tells the story much better than I."

"You're doing a fine job, Justice," Keegan said.

"Am I getting a little long-winded?"

"No," Lily said. "You're telling the story with the care and respect it deserves. Please go on."

He smiled at her and nodded. "Thanks for that, Lily." He sighed. "Okay, so, once Granddad finally completely gave in, *that* was then he saw a light. A small light that grew bigger and bigger. He actually thought, finally, he was passing over. But within the light, he saw an angel. Really, an angel, and the angel approached him and knelt down beside him and gave him a sip of water from a wooden cup. He said the water didn't taste like anything he'd ever had to drink and he felt it move through his body and he felt immediately better. He said the pain was diminishing and he suddenly felt warm and comforted."

"Wait," Nolan said. "So sorry to interrupt, but, you said Thomas was ten-years-old?"

"Yes."

"And he was visited by an angel?"

"Yes. I know it's hard to believe but..." Justice began.

"It's not hard to believe," Nolan said quickly. He looked at Heather and then at Keegan. "Isn't that the same story I just read in Grandmaster Kino's memoirs that you let me borrow?"

Keegan smiled. "It sounds very much the same. I'm thinking we need to put Tom Sawyer and Eric Kino in touch with each other. Let's hear the rest of Justice's story and then let's give the book to him before he leaves tonight to take back to his cottage to read."

Nolan nodded. “Sounds good. Okay, sorry to interrupt but I got a little excited there for a minute, because, well, I mean, God is so good.”

They all smiled.

Justice’s brows were furrowed. “Well, you’ve got me intrigued. I can’t wait to read this book you’re talking about.”

“It’s a short book. You can read it in a few hours,” Lily said. “And it’s an amazing story, but please go on with the story about Thomas.”

Justice smiled. “Yes ma’am. Let’s see, where were we?”

“The angel gave him some water and he immediately felt better. Warm and comforted, I believe you said,” Lily replied.

He nodded. “Right. And the angel smiled at him. Granddad says he had the kindest smile he’d ever seen. It was like love was oozing out of him. The first thing the angel said was it took granddad a long time to finally surrender. He said, one has to completely and obediently surrender to the will of God and once we do that, everything will change for the better. We have to trust God. Trust His wisdom, trust His plan. He told my grandfather that he had a special calling in life. First, he was to tell his father, whom is my great grandfather, to feed Thomas only pure wholesome foods. Thomas’ father’s name was Delton Sawyer III, and he was a doctor. The angel told Thomas to tell his father to start a brand of foods that people could trust to have no pesticides, no artificial alterations, high vibration meats from humanely kept animals, free range, organic grasses. Pure meant healthy. And if his father would do that, then the company would be blessed.

“But that message was only the beginning of what the angel told Granddad. He told him he would one day take over the company and he would use his resources to teach the world about the importance of keeping our bodies pure, because when we do that, God’s Holy Spirit can get through to us much easier. He told Granddad that God is real. Jesus is the real, true, Son of God, that He really did come to earth as the perfect lamb and was sacrificed on the cross to redeem us from our guilt and shame and sins, and was resurrected back to life, and brought us eternal life in God’s Kingdom with our loved ones.

“The angel told him he must do his best to live a noble life. He told him that we must always try to live the best life and live as holy and honest as we can. Of course, we aren’t perfect, and that’s where the Grace of Jesus comes in, yet still, we must allow the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and change us. We must learn to control our base carnal urges and pretty much consider ‘what would Jesus do,’ in every situation. If we build a relationship with Him, this will not be a difficult thing to do, though it does require effort.

“The angel said that he knew that my grandfather and his father both knew Jesus, but they needed to go further, work hard even when they’re tired. Never give in, and to be ready, for there was a great battle to be fought against the evil that exists in this world.”

He stopped and smiled. “Granddad said that part scared him a bit. He said before he could even voice his fear, the angel said, ‘Do not fear, Thomas, God is with us.’ He

said it as if the angel had read my grandfather's mind. He then asked my grandfather if he accepted this calling, this mission the Lord has given him and my grandfather nodded his head and answered 'yes.' He then asked the angel, 'does this mean I'm NOT gonna die?' And the angel smiled at him and told him he had too much to accomplish in this life and he would live a full and healthy life.

"Lastly, the angel asked my grandfather a huge question. He asked him if he could have anything in this world, anything at all no matter how big and how impossible it seemed, what would he ask for." Justice stopped as his voice clogged with emotion.

Iris had fallen asleep against his chest and he absently ran his hand over her dark, silky curls. He probably didn't realize the loving gesture it was, but the Tanner family all smiled at the sight. They sat silently, waiting for Justice to regain his composure.

Justice looked back up. "Young Thomas Sawyer asked if little baby Catherine could be found alive and healthy. He says even now, that he didn't ask for that because he was being unselfish. He asked selfishly, because he didn't think he could be happy knowing he survived and his little Caty-bug, like he always called her, did not survive. He said that the angel seemed quite pleased with his request and told him it would be as my grandfather requested.

"The angel then lifted my grandfather into his arms, carried him about twenty feet and set him down just outside the wheat field on the prairie strip. Twenty feet. He'd been only a mere twenty feet from the edge of the field. The angel knelt beside him and began to teach him about life, things from the Bible and what they meant. He told him many people think they can be saved by grace and then go on and willfully sin and do whatever they want and still be in God's good grace. They don't realize that God knows their hearts and will always bring justice." He smiled. "Thus my name."

They all smiled at that.

"He taught him to not take advantage of God's grace or there will be consequences. He told him to study and take everything to the Lord and let the Holy Spirit be his teacher, and not put his trust in any man. He was told to be careful who he listens to, to be discerning and that by their fruits you shall know them. He taught him Lucifer and his minions will try to use part of the truth to pull you away. He told him to live in love and do not judge or draw conclusions, however, do not ever compromise with evil. You can love the sinner but not the sin. You cannot love evil."

Justice stopped, smiled and looked around the table to see if he'd lost anyone on that, but they seemed all in. He knew they would be. He could tell from Gabe's work and from being in Lily's presence that the Tanners were definitely part of the light. He drew a deep breath. "The angel taught him through sunrise and into the day. He gave him a few more sips from the wooden cup. He then did something amazing. He turned his back on Thomas and when he turned back around, he had little Caty-bug in his arms." Justice smiled at the contented sighs. "My grandfather said he began to cry and praise the Lord and thanked Him over and over and the angel set little Caty down in Thomas' lap.

"My grandfather then asked how he would get home. The angel told him that his family was on the way to find him now. He reminded him of everything he'd taught

him, reminded him to work hard, don't complain, even when he's tired, to pick up his cross and carry whatever the Lord asks him to carry. He told him to never cry 'woe is me' or complain or slip into victimhood. The angel then bid him farewell and disappeared right in front of my grandfather. Immediately, the pain was back and he groaned with the pain. Caty-bug started to cry, wail actually, really loud and within about ten minutes Thomas heard someone say, 'I think I hear a baby! Over here! Look! There they are! Both of them. It's a miracle."

Justice stopped and smiled. "And indeed it *was* a miracle. My grandfather and Caty were taken to a hospital. His leg was put in a cast and it healed perfectly. Catherine was surprisingly unhurt. Not even a scratch or a bruise."

My great grandfather, Dr. Delton Sawyer III, was a good man and when Thomas told him all that had happened, he actually believed him. He'd said, funny thing was, he'd been thinking about teaching people about eating pure foods, free of poisons and unnatural manipulations. Now he knew that was exactly what he was going to do. He began with raw milk, raw honey, and wheat for bread. The land of milk and honey and the bread of life. That's what he always said."

"I'm so happy that his father believed him," Rose said.

"Right," Violet agreed. "Unlike Reverend Clark's story."

"Who's Reverend Clark?" Justice asked.

Keegan smiled. "He's a man out in California who the Kinos are helping out right now. But before we tell you all about him, we'd better give it to you in bits and pieces, and the first piece is that you really need to read the book we're about to give you."

Heather rose. "I'll go get it. It's in my room."

"Justice," Lizzy said softly. "Do you mind if I ask who Thomas married and was she on that plane?"

Justice sighed and shook his head. "No ma'am, I don't mind. My grandmother's name was Clara. My parents actually named my sister after her. Grandma passed away twenty years ago from a brain aneurysm when I was just seven years old."

"I'm so sorry," Lizzy said. "Oh, Justice, you've faced a lot of heartache."

Justice nodded. "Yes ma'am. The generational curse." He smiled. "Actually, I just call it that. Granddad didn't actually use those words. He said that the dark forces of this world began to target our family. He said they saw our light and said, no way, we are not letting that family find Christ. He said the bad guys, their center of power is in that home and all we needed to do was go there, restore it, reclaim it, bless it, cast out demons, cleanse it, fill it with the light and love of Jesus, and we will have done what we need to do."

"Well then, if that's all you had to do, why didn't he come do it a long time ago?" CJ asked.

"He didn't know until recently that was what had to be done. He didn't know about the house until I found those journals. He didn't know about Knox. But once we found the journals, he had a strong vision and powerful message that said to go to Pine Forest and take care of business."

"What do you think attracted the dark forces to that cute little house in a cute little

town?" Daisy asked.

"It wasn't the house," Keegan suddenly said.

Justice looked up at the man. He was strong, powerful, not just physically, but spiritually and mentally. He was quiet, but when he spoke it was powerful.

"What do you mean, Dad?" Daisy asked.

"I think they came to the house because they saw a bright light. Now, that light may have been Knox, or any member of his family, or all of them, for that matter, but it was bright and they wanted to put it out."

"According to his journals," Justice began. "Knox didn't believe in God, but Birdie did and so did his good friend, Henry Halford. In his journals Knox bemoans how harsh he was with Henry, how obstinate he was, stubborn. He speculates that if he'd opened his heart and allowed God into his life, maybe at least he could've been able to understand that he'd see his wife and children again, and at most, protected his family or even healed them."

"That would've been so good for them," Daisy said softly.

Lizzy nodded. "So, the dark forces, they were attracted by someone's light, and they may not know all about us, but maybe they knew something wonderful would come from this Sawyer family and so they worked very hard to try to put an end to them."

Keegan smiled at his wife. "Exactly. Just like they keep trying to end Gabe and they tried to take out Rose, and CJ and Jericho and hurt Violet, and your mom, and you, Lily."

CJ spoke up. "But you have seen fit to take action to protect your family, sir. Which is a beautiful thing."

Justice nodded. "The bad guys may not be privy to know our calling or the direction God wants us to take, but they can see bright lights and their mission is always to destroy anything that is of the light."

Keegan nodded. "And the Sawyer family must have had a huge calling and the demons tried to take them out, but they didn't succeed. The four strongest survived and look what just one of those brothers produced. Another man like Grandmaster Kino, a business that helps everyone eat better and draw closer to God, and you, young man, who probably don't even understand how special you are and what amazing things God has in store for you."

Justice sighed, because he wasn't so sure about that. He didn't feel special. He felt very unworthy.

Lily looked at him and smiled. He did seem to have a light around him.

"Daddy," Lily began. "So, if that house is filled with demons, then why am I so attracted to it? I've been inside it many times now. Why have I not felt them or seen them?"

"Good question, sweetheart. Maybe it's because you rise and put on the armor of God every day, or maybe because your mother and I also pray over you every day and night."

Jericho nodded. "Yes, and also, a lot of times, if you're not looking for something,

you don't see it."

Justice smiled. "That's right. That's what comes with innocence. They don't see the danger. They see only the good."

Lily looked into his eyes and smiled.

The others smiled at the compliment Justice had just given Lily in an off the cuff kind of way.

"Lily," Justice began. "Are you busy tomorrow?"

"Hmm, well, I have to do breakfast at the Inn in the morning and then attend a martial arts class at 10:00. Why? Can I help you with something?"

"I was hoping I could get you to show me around the rest of the town. I want to visit the GTCC and see the schools, and all the other places of interest. I also wanted to find a gym because I need to get in a work out."

Lily smiled. "Why don't you come with me to *Appel Martial Arts*? Uncle John has a complete fitness studio and attending a class is also a great workout."

"Even if I don't know martial arts?"

They all nodded. "You'll know something by the time you leave the class," Keegan stated.

Justice looked around. "Are you all martial artists?"

Keegan glanced around. "Not all. But the girls and I, and Gabe of course, and CJ, because he's Ameritech and every agent has to be a 2nd degree black belt in Zendo Ryu or in two other forms of martial arts."

"Interesting. So what belt are the girls?"

Keegan smiled. "Iris is a yellow belt. Heather and Rose are black belts. Daisy and Lily are red belts with a black stripe and Violet is a red belt. The babies are practicing their keyais."

The group chuckled.

"So, Justice, will you join me in class?" Lily asked.

He smiled. "I'd like that."

"Wonderful. And then I'll take you all around Pine Forest."

"Sounds good. And then can I take you to lunch?"

"Of course."

He nodded in satisfaction.

"That's quick work there, good job Sawyer," Nolan said with a grin.

"I was about to say the same thing," both CJ and Jericho said at the same time, causing the rest at the table to laugh.

Justice shrugged. "I mean, well, I mean Lily has been so kind. I thought she was the logical choice to show me around."

"Don't mess it up, man," Nolan said.

Justice grinned. "Okay, well, it's getting late and I guess I'd better head back to the cottage."

Heather handed him the book. He looked over the small blue book. *Messages from God, the Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino*. "Can't wait to get into this. I'll go read tonight."

"Justice, did you want to stay just a few more minutes and have some dessert?" Lizzy said. "We have homemade apple pie made with local organically grown apples, raw sugar, almond flour and raw butter. We also have vanilla ice cream, and pumpkin bread with caramel sauce."

His eyes opened wide. "Wow, I can't turn that down."

"Come on everyone," Lizzy said as she headed to the kitchen. "Here Jericho, hold onto Isaiah for me."

"Which one are you gonna have?" Lily asked. "Or, you could do like Gabe always did."

"What did Gabe do?"

"He always has some of everything."

Justice smiled. "I like his style. Yes, I'll do like Gabe."

✝✝✝

Romans 12:2

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Chapter Twelve

12:15 AM EST Wee hours of Wednesday Morning
Cottage 1, Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice put the book down, picked up his phone and immediately called his grandfather.

"Justice?" his grandfather answered immediately. "Everything okay?"

"Hey Granddad, yes I'm okay and I'm sorry to be calling you so late at night, but my heart is so full, I really couldn't wait until morning to call you."

"That's okay. I've always told you to call me anytime. So, tell me, why is your heart so full?"

"As I told you earlier, I was invited over to the Tanner's home for dinner. Lily wanted me to help her tell her family everything we'd told each other. As it turned out, Mr. Tanner asked about you and I ended up telling them your story, Granddad, your miracle in the field story."

"So, then, did they have a hard time with it?"

"No sir. Not at all. They were totally onboard from the very beginning, and the reason why is because of their friendship with Grandmaster Kino. They gave me a book, it's called *Messages from God, the Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino*. I just finished reading it and I am blown away. Granddad, he had the same type thing happen to him. He was ten years old. He fell through the earth and was trapped in a cave underground. An angel came to speak to him, to teach him, to call him. He said to him all the same type things you've talked about your angel telling you. And he had a cousin with him who fell and died and Eric Kino asked for his one wish to be to give her life back and it happened. Granddad, Mr. Tanner said they were going to try to put you in touch with Grandmaster Kino."

"I would love that."

"And I want you to read the book. You can probably pick it up at the book store on the Boulevard, or if you'd rather, you can download it off of Amazon."

"I promise I'll get right on it."

Justice nodded. He knew that his grandfather always did everything as quickly as possible. Why wait when you can do it right now. That's what he always said.

"So, son, have you figured out yet exactly how to go about taking care of business down there?"

Justice sighed. "Not really. I know you said the answer was right in front of my face. Mr. Tanner says the same thing."

"Well, pray about it, calm your mind and listen. It will come to you."

"Yes sir. I will. I am. In the meantime, Lily Tanner is going to show me around town tomorrow and tell me about some more of the history of the town."

"Good. That sounds like a good thing to be doing. Be very careful, Justice. Put on the armor of God. Protect yourself and protect that young lady too."

"I intend to. Well, goodnight, Granddad. I love you, sir."

"Good night, Justice. I love you too, son. Call me anytime."

✝✝✝

January 15th Wednesday Morning

Appel Martial Arts, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily stood nearby chatting with Daisy and several other women as she waited for Justice to emerge from the locker room. Master Appel had offered him a uniform in place of his sweats and t-shirt and he headed back to the locker room to change.

The class on a weekday morning was mostly women and only a few men. There were two of Jericho's men, Micah Ferguson and Luke Jackson, who had become interested in cross-training with Ameritech and wanted to start the martial arts training and be ahead of the game when that program is launched. They started only a few weeks ago and are white belts.

Lily smiled as Justice emerged. Luke and Micah were nearby and offered their hands and welcomed him. They tugged on his uniform top and laughed. Lily realized they were laughing because the uniform top was too small. Micah motioned to Master Appel, pointed at Justice, Master Appel went to a cabinet and pulled out another top and brought it to Justice.

Justice pulled the too-small top over his head, and the room got very quiet.

Lily glanced around at the other females who'd been chattering away a moment ago. She looked back at Justice and couldn't blame them. She knew he was strong and athletic looking, but hadn't realized he was so extremely fit, very muscular, very cut and very hot. Washboard abs. Bulging biceps and triceps. Perfect pecs. She watched as he quickly pulled on the larger top, and wrapped a white belt around his waist. Then Master Appel moved forward and showed him the proper way to tie the belt.

Justice nodded his thanks and turned to look across the room directly at Lily. She moved forward. "You look very nice in the uniform," she said.

He smiled. "You do too."

"It was very brave of you to offer to take this class with me."

He shrugged. "Always up for learning new things."

She smiled. "You seem very, um, fit. Have you played sports?"

He nodded. "The usual. Football, baseball, basketball, some tennis, golf, ran track. No big accomplishments to brag about though."

"Well to me, just playing all those sports is accomplishment enough."

"Line up by rank," Master Appel commanded.

Lily smiled. "That puts you in the back of the class. Watch me and I'll try to help you."

He chuckled. "I'll do that."

"What's so funny?"

"You don't have to tell me to watch you. I don't think I can keep my eyes off you anyway."

She giggled and blushed.

By the end of class no one was giggling or blushing. They were breathing hard, exhausted, and covered in sweat.

Many of the members of the class headed home still wearing their uniforms. Both Lily and Daisy headed to the showers because they had places they had to go. Daisy to work at the Center. Lily, also to the Center to show Justice the place and then to lunch. Justice too hit the showers along with Micah Ferguson and Luke Jackson.

When the men emerged, John Appel called them to his desk.

"So, guys, what do you think?"

Micah nodded. "I'm gonna go all in. If Ameritech is gonna cross train and I can be an agent and a special ops firefighter, I'm gonna give it my all."

"And Jericho is good with that, right?" John asked.

"He is. Of course, I'll still be first and foremost a firefighter and I will continue to train others and I will eventually become one who trains the trainers."

John nodded. "And you, Luke?" John asked.

"Ditto for me. My loyalty is always to Jericho, as it should be. He gave me a huge opportunity and he comes first. But he's as excited about cross-training as I am. He's just waiting to get his leg healed and strong again before he starts. But as far as you training me, Master Appel, I am a loyal, hardworking student and I will give it my all."

John smiled. "I have no doubt." He turned to Justice. "So, Justice, did you get a good workout?"

Justice nodded with a grin. "One of the hardest workouts I've ever had. Thank you so much for allowing me to visit your class."

"It was my pleasure. Now, obviously, this class is mostly female. There is a night class. Nights and Saturdays. Sometimes I teach it, but most times it's one of my assistants. It's actually a harder class and is for the more serious students. I come in every once in a while and make it impossible, just to show where they need to be reaching. There are several black belts, mostly teens between sixteen and nineteen, but there are also some highly trained men and women who take the night classes. They also train hard on their own every single day. You are all three invited to that class. You are just beginners, but you won't be for long when you attend that class. Justice, I realize you don't actually live here, but for your extended visit, you are welcome to join us whenever you can."

"Thank you so much," Justice said. He had the presence of mind to bow to his new teacher.

John returned the honor and then Luke and Micah followed suit.

John smiled. "Good job guys. Hope to see you soon."

They shook hands.

Justice turned immediately to find Lily. She was standing alone near the door. She wore blue jeans and a fuzzy white sweater with a light blue wool coat, and tan boots. Her hair was down and she looked amazing. She smiled at him as he approached, her blue eyes sparkling.

"Sorry I made you wait on me," he said immediately.

"It was only a few minutes. I'm glad Uncle John took time to speak to you. Did he invite you to his night class?"

Justice smiled. "He did."

"Are you gonna take him up on that?"

"I think I am, for as long as I'm here."

She nodded. The words he spoke were words she didn't want to think about yet. He was a great guy. He loved God. And she would love to get to know him better. But if it's not meant to be and he goes home, then so be it. She smiled at him and looked him over. He'd showered and changed into blue jeans and a thick tan sweater. He had his coat tucked under his arm.

"Well, ready to go check out the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*?"

He nodded. "Can't wait."

✝✝✝

January 15th, 9:00 AM PST Wednesday Morning

Ameritech Offices, Los Angeles, California

"Okay then, this will be a one week undercover operation," Jason said. "We will be working with Feds and some of the *Huntington Beach Police Department*. Senior Agent Cam Wallace will go under as a high school student. He will be considered Matteo Peevey's replacement. That information will be fed to the buyers and sellers from Anthony Brown who was arrested last Sunday. Brown will overhear the word that one of T-bone's guys named Scott Dawson, that's you, Cam, Scott will be enrolling in the high school and will have what everyone needs as soon as they prove that he can trust him. They'll be told that first contact with Scottie boy will be freebies as long as they bring him good info so he can get rid of any talkers. Once this is taken care of, they have been told that T-bone will be running things from the inside through Scott Dawson."

Cam pulled out his phone when it buzzed. It was an unknown number. He set the phone face down on his thigh and looked up at Jason. "So, Chief Lee, am I enrolling in high school today?"

"Yes."

"Who's my mommy?"

Jason pointed at an agent. "You know Agent Tina Herrington."

Cam smiled and nodded. "She hardly looks old enough to be my mother."

She grinned. "That's what I said. But I'm gonna change up my appearance a little. And you, young man, need to get a very close shave and do your hair up all poofy like the kids nowadays."

"I got this," Cam said.

"The rest of you will be backup for the big bust and Agents Brown and Trout, you will be in his ear at all times."

"Yes sir."

Cam's phone buzzed again. This time it was a text. He turned the phone over and read it quickly and his face paled.

~~I know you don't recognize the number, Cameron, but this is your mother. I received your message and I'm trying to reach you. I'd appreciate it if you call me back asap.

He texted quickly.

~In a meeting. I will have to excuse myself. Call you right back.

He looked up at one of his bosses, which happened to be Joey Adams.

"Problem?" Joey asked.

"Yes sir. I need to make a call. It's urgent."

"Of course, go ahead. Is Jeffy okay?"

"Yes sir. It's not Jeffy."

Joey nodded and Cam quickly left the room.

He called the number and it rang three times before she answered.

"Hello, Cameron."

"Hello, Mom," he said softly.

She was silent a moment. "I got your message," she finally said. "So, you've gone and married that Kino girl."

He sighed. "Yes. Her name is June Flower and she's now a Wallace."

"And you actually have a kid?"

"Yes, we have a child. A son."

"Well, I don't quite know what to say. I mean, that is interesting."

"Well, Mom, you could say 'congratulations'."

"Yes, of course. Congratulations on your marriage and on having a son. That is amazing. So, what's his name?"

"His name is Elijah Cameron Kino Wallace and he is beautiful."

There was several seconds of silence. "So, did you and the Kino girl do that hyphenated last name kind of thing?"

"No."

"Then why is his name Kino Wallace?"

"Well, Mom, it's Wallace after me, and Kino after Grandmaster Kino, who is Jeffy's father."

"I see."

Cameron frowned because he doubted that. He thought he put away all of his resentment, but he could feel the old feelings come up. He doubted that his mother would understand that they named the baby after Grandmaster Kino because the man was the only real father Cam had ever known. The man had taken Cam under his wing. He'd come to most of his high school and college football games. He'd been in his corner and helped him become the man he was today. Cam sighed. "Mom, listen, I reached out to you and Dad in hopes that you might want to meet your grandson."

She gasped. "Oh my, I guess that's right. I am now a grandmother."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not sure how I feel about that."

Cam sighed.

"Cam, you say you reached out to your father?" Anna Wallace asked.

"Yes."

"Has he returned your call?"

"Not yet."

"That reminds me, Cam, how did you get my number anyway?"

"I work for Ameritech, Mom. I can pretty much get any information I want to get, even unpublished private numbers, and addresses too," he put in, just to make her squirm a bit.

"Ameritech? I've actually heard of them. They're a very prestigious international company."

"Yes, I know," he said dryly.

"Oh, that's right. They are the company that worked on that case with that crazy Senator Daley."

"Correct."

"So, anyway, you have your father's new number, right?"

"Yes I do."

"Would you mind giving it to me? I really need to speak with your father."

"Sorry, Mom. I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because I'd need to speak to him first and make sure it's okay with him."

"Why wouldn't you want to help me out and just give me his number?"

"Mom, if Dad hasn't given you his new number he must have a reason. And my reason for reaching out to you was not to reunite you and Dad. It was to see if you'd like to meet your grandson. So, if that's not the case, please just say so, and I'll end this call."

"Well, you don't have to get all pushy, Cam. You were always so impatient. I think I *would* like to meet my grandson, and your new wife."

"Well, she's not so new. We've been married for three years."

"Oh. And you didn't invite me to the wedding."

"No, I didn't. At the time I was very angry with you and Dad. You didn't seem to care about me at all. You didn't come to even one of my football games. You didn't even know that I graduated from college and went to work for Ameritech. I had resentment built up in my heart against you. I'd tried to reach out to you before and you never answered. I didn't know where you were or what you were doing. And you didn't know or care about me and I was resentful of that. But now, having a child, and loving that child with every fiber of my being, it has made me want to reach out again and maybe put all the resentment behind me." He quieted and heard her sigh on the other end.

"I can be in Cali by this weekend," she finally said.

"I'm gonna be tied up working a case until this time next week. So, it would be best if you could come next Friday week, which is the 24th."

"A case?"

"Yes. I told you, I work for Ameritech."

"Right. And you went to college all just to become a security guard."

"I'm much more than that, Mom. If you really want to know I'll fill you in next Friday."

"Okay. So, where should I come to see you?"

He rattled off the address for the Kino Estate in Crystal Cove, California.

"Well then, I guess I'll see you on the 24th," she said cheerily.

"I'm very much looking forward to it," Cam said. "And Mom, um, thanks, I mean, for calling me back."

"You're welcome. One more thing. If your father calls, don't tell him that I'm coming to see you."

"Well Mom, here's the thing. If he doesn't ask me, I won't volunteer the information. But if he asks, I won't lie to him."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't lie. Dishonesty is the cause of most problems in this world."

"Well don't you just sound all condescending."

"I don't mean to sound that way. It's just the way I feel. But anyway, Mom, thanks for calling and I'll see you on the 24th."

"Okay. Bye Cameron."

"Bye, Mom."

✞✞✞

January 16th Thursday Afternoon

Ameritech Training Facility, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

They'd been at it for hours. Disassembling and assembling a gun and a rifle. Loading and unloading. Again with speed. And again. Finally, they were loaded, chambered and ready to shoot at a target. It didn't take long to realize that once again, Gabe Tanner was at the top of the class. Once again, because he'd been a leader since the day he'd arrived to train. He'd stayed consistently in the top one percent throughout strength training, obstacle courses, endurance sequences and even swimming. Yesterday, during hand to hand combat training, he ruled. Everyone figured he would since he'd trained under Grandmaster Kino for two Mini-MARTS. No one had been able to take him down and he'd come out on top of every match up. To Gabe's credit, he remained humble and vowed to help each of them.

Gabe had been surprised that in combat they were being instructed by a man Gabe knew. Senior Agent Tristan Callahan, a JETT, who'd been a Marine Raider special forces with Gabe's father. He hadn't gone easy on Gabe, but did use him to demonstrate on. It was painful, but he was happy to help.

Today, they'd begun the weapons training with a man named Agent Gil Grimes. He was a complete professional and a stickler for perfection. He tested them every step of the way to make sure they had perfect knowledge of their firearms. They'd been through the first round of actual shooting at targets when another instructor appeared.

They were ordered to attention as Division Chief Jeff Davis approached the outdoor range and stood before them.

Gabe had to work very hard to not smile when Jeff looked in his direction. Gabe was pleased to see him. Jeff and his father were big time friends. Jeff was one of

Ameritech's first sharpshooters. He was a natural, like Gabe. He was sniper quality and highly respected.

"Hello agents," Jeff said. "At ease. I am Division Chief Jeff Davis. You may call me Chief Davis. I started out as a regular agent, then became a JETT when the program was initiated. In that training it became clear that I had a particular talent with firearms and became Ameritech's first sniper. Some of you may have the same abilities and if so, you may apply to be a sniper agent. Today I want simply to assess you. I realize some of you are just beginning to learn about firearms and some of you, have grown up with them. By the time you finish, you *all* will be proficient, or, you will be gone. So, I suggest you work very hard to get it right."

Jeff turned to look at the agent at the far right of the line. "Your name?"

"Agent Dyal, sir,"

"Bring me your pistol range target please."

Dyal approached and handed him the paper target. Jeff looked it over and nodded. "Not bad. You hit the target thirty-four times, but you missed the thug eight times and barely nicked him four times. Still, not bad for a first time on the range. You may step back." He looked at the next man. "Agent?"

"Agent Blade, sir."

Jeff waved him forward, took the target and looked it over. "Again, not bad. You missed the target completely eight times, but your remaining twenty-six shots are all within the chest and groin. Good job. Keep at it."

Jeff continued down the line and only a few agents had a less than good grade. Gabe was last in line. "Agent?" Jeff asked.

Gabe thought he was pretending to not know him so not to show special treatment. "Agent Tanner, sir."

Jeff motioned him forward. Gabe presented Jeff with his target and waited. Jeff frowned. "Well, I'm a little disappointed. Agent Grimes told me you were the top at disassembling and assembling. The ones you hit are a very tight grouping here, but it appears you missed ten shots."

Gabe frowned. "No sir, I didn't. I did not miss any shots."

The other agents drew quick breaths, feeling sure Gabe was gonna get himself kicked out of the program.

Jeff tried very hard not to laugh.

Gabe looked up at his face, his eyebrows raised.

"You may explain, Agent Tanner."

"Chief Davis, *sir,*" Gabe said pointedly. "If you will look very closely at my target, you will see a few 'perfect shot' groupings, perfect shot meaning, different bullet, same hole. That will account for the ten hits you don't see."

"So, you're telling me that you hit the target in the exact same place in the exact same hole ten times?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying," Gabe said.

"I'm afraid, Agent Tanner, that you're gonna have to prove it."

"Fine by me, uh, sir, uh, Chief Davis, sir."

Jeff couldn't hold it in. He gave a short chuckle.

"Let's see it, Tanner. Everyone gather around and let's watch and learn."

Gabe stepped up to the counter. He laid his gun down and two magazines next to it, shook out his hands and looked up at Jeff. "Say when."

"Go," Jeff said.

Gabe lifted the gun, inserted the first mag, chambered a bullet, squeezed off seventeen shots, drop the mag, inserted a new one, chambered, squeezed off seventeen more shots, dropped the mag, laid the gun down and backed away.

"Range is cold. Go get it," Jeff ordered.

Gabe took off, grabbed the target and presented it to Jeff.

Jeff checked it over. "Well, Tanner, I watched you closely. You didn't miss a shot and your grouping here is very tight. I only count fourteen holes, but the middle here is obliterated. That's some pretty fine shootin' young man."

Gabe gave a soft laugh. "Thank you, sir."

"Demonstrate one more time for me, Tanner."

"Yes sir."

"Only this time I want three to the head, three to the heart, three to the abdomen, three to each leg and end it with two to the neck."

Gabe nodded. "Head, heart, ab, leg, leg, two to the neck. Got it."

He stepped forward, arranged the gun and mag and waited for Jeff's nod and then quickly completed the assignment. He then ran to retrieve the target and handed it to Jeff.

Jeff nodded. "Good job, but it appears that you missed one shot on each leg."

Gabe smiled. "Yes sir, it appears that way, but again, you will find that it's a perfect shot grouping."

Jeff chuckled and the other agents all smiled in admiration.

"Attention," Jeff said quickly and the guys all lined up.

"I'll tell you the truth now. I know this young man. His father and I are good friends. But I did not teach Gabe how to shoot. He's been shooting since he was a toddler and he's a natural. I allowed him to demonstrate his skills for you here today for a purpose. He didn't know I was gonna be here and he didn't know I was gonna call on him to do this, but he stepped up and got it done. I wanted you to see his skills for a reason. Ya see, I've heard about the red team's plan for a one hundred percent success rate. The physical training part of that is not the most difficult. The firearms proficiency and the brainwork is the most difficult.

"Our agents are the best. They are smart, savvy, and they have no ego. They all perform to the best of their abilities and those abilities are vast as long as you believe in yourselves. I believe in you. Gabe apparently believes in you. Now, you can believe in him and his ability to help you succeed. He has a gift in helping you to understand what you're doing wrong when you consistently miss your target. He can lead you and guide you and teach you, if you let him. He has no ego. He doesn't think he's better than you. He believes he's here to serve you and help you to be the best, to succeed and be the first group to have that one hundred percent success rate."

Gabe was looking down, his cheeks pink.

"Tanner."

Gabe looked up quickly. "Yes sir."

"Have I sufficiently embarrassed you?"

"Uh, yes sir. Quite sufficient."

The other agents laughed.

"Well, you have no reason to be embarrassed. What you'd better be is prepared. Because word has gotten around to the black unit and blue unit and they now have eyes on you. They are *not* hoping for your demise, but they *are* watching to see a miracle take place. Make it happen."

"Yes sir," all the agents responded together.

Jeff nodded with a smile. "I like what I see here. No ego. Only a team. That's good, because we are ALL Ameritech and we ARE all a team. A team that works for the betterment, safety and protection of mankind, and especially the innocent. You will be partnered with members of the black team or blue team when you get out of training. There should be no animosity between you. We are strong and our strength allows us to achieve great success. It allows us to be an actual equalizer. We have to be strong to achieve that status. So be strong. Gabe, turn these guys into the best sharpshooters we've ever had."

"Yes sir, we've got this sir."

"Good. I'll turn you back over to Agent Grimes."

Agent Grimes stepped forward.

"Just so you know, Chief Davis is a hero. He and Chief Tanner many years ago, were involved in the rescue of five kidnapped baby boys and the return of hundreds more children who had been taken by a child trafficking ring. Since then, Chief Davis has saved the day too many times to count."

Gabe nodded.

"Agent Tanner, do you have something to say?"

"Oh, uh, well, I was just thinking of how he saved me. When I was abducted last year, he hunted down and took out the sniper that was shooting me. I'm very grateful for him and his skills."

Jeff smiled. "Just doin' my job."

Gabe smiled at the common reply.

"Well, that's enough warm fuzzies men. You've been at it all day. There is a four mile run back to the dorms. Gather your guns and ammo, stash your guns correctly. Hit the cafeteria for dinner, shower, clean up and hit the sack."

"Yes sir."

"Run full speed as long as you can, but do not walk."

"Yes sir."

"Dismissed."

✝✝✝

January 16th 5:45 PM PST Thursday Evening
Bell Home, Lake Forest, California

Naomi Bell finally pulled up into the little driveway. She was tired and didn't feel well at all and thought maybe she was coming down with something. Her head was pounding, her body ached, her throat was sore and she was pretty sure she had a fever. She hoped the girls don't get sick. She leaned in the backseat and unbuckled two-year-old Callie from her car seat and smiled at Ellie. "Can you unbuckle your seat, sweeite?"

"I can do it, Mommy," Ellie said in her cute little voice.

"You're so smart, my little four-year-old," Naomi crooned at her. "Let's hurry in. We're late and I bet Daddy is hungry."

She grabbed their bags and her purse, lifted Callie into her arms and headed to the front door. It opened for her as she came up the porch steps.

"Where have you been?" Aaron Bell asked as she came in through the door.

Naomi sighed. "I told you I had a late client, honey. And then I had to go pick up the girls and there was a giant accident and I was stuck in that traffic."

"You always have an excuse, don't you?"

She shrugged. "It's the truth." She set Callie down and began taking off her coat. "Ellie, take your coat off and hang it on the hook and then take Callie to your room and find something to play while I get dinner ready."

"I don't wanna play with Callie. She always gets mad."

"Well, just color with her, please."

"I don't wanna..."

"Do it now!" Aaron yelled.

Ellie's lips began to tremble.

Naomi knelt down to her. "Sweetie, please help mommy and take your sister to your room and color, okay? After dinner I'll read you your favorite book and we'll have some milk and cookies."

Ellie smiled. "Okay, Mommy." She held out her hand. "Come on, Callie, let's go color."

Naomi watched them go with a sigh and turned to head to the kitchen but Aaron grabbed her arm.

"You spoil those little brats, you know that?"

Naomi was so tired and feeling so bad, she didn't think before she spoke. "Those little girls you call brats are your children and you don't even think to say 'hello' to them or 'how was your day' or anything other than yell at them. What kind of father is that? You don't get to call them brats when you don't ever interact with them at all."

He grabbed her by both her arms and looked into her eyes. "You'd better watch what you say to me."

"Let go of me. I don't feel well and I don't have time to fight with you. Besides, you've been drinking."

"Well I've been home over an hour with no food on the table."

"There's food in the refrigerator that you could have warmed up if you weren't so lazy."

He hauled back and struck her right across the face. She stumbled back, holding her cheek. "That's always your first response to everything, isn't it? You hit because

you don't know how to express how you feel with words. But, Aaron, I'm tired. I'm sick. I'll go make your dinner and then, as far as I'm concerned, you can eat it or go to hell. I don't care which."

He grabbed her again, by the front of her shirt. "Are you having an affair?"

She laughed. "Me? Who would want me?"

His eyes narrowed. "You don't deny it?"

"Of course I deny it. Why would you even think that?"

"Because you seem like you don't care how I feel about you."

She sighed. "At this minute, I don't. How could I? I'm sick. You don't care. I'm tired. You don't care. We have two beautiful daughters together. You don't care about them. And how can I care about you when you hit me whenever the urge comes. You hurt me with your fists and with your words. What happened to the man I met and fell in love with? Where is he? You're mean and you drink too much and smell bad. When was the last time you smiled? When was the last time you told me you loved me? Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go make dinner. Then I am going to read to the girls and get them to bed and I'm going to take some medicine and go to bed myself."

She walked past him to the kitchen, relieved that he didn't grab her and beat her to death.

✝✝✝

January 17th 6:30 AM Friday Morning
Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily, Rose, Daisy, Heather, Melaynah and Hannah took their turns shooting, stood back and watched as the boys and men took their turn shooting. Lily glanced at Hannah as Charlie Stewart age fourteen, and his brother Matt who was about to turn thirteen in three days, and their cousin David Turner who was thirteen took their turns. Lily knew that Hannah was interested in Charlie. Hannah was thirteen, though she looked much younger.

The way Hannah was smiling at Charlie, made Lily pay attention to how Charlie was shooting. He was only fourteen, well, almost fifteen, and he was good, much like her own brother Gabe was good. Gabe however, was a prodigy when it came to shooting. There weren't many who could shoot like him. Still, Charlie obviously knew what he was doing.

The boys finished and it was the men's turn.

"Come on, Jericho," Rose cheered for her man. "Show us how it's done."

Jericho turned and smiled at her. "Good grief, Rosie, nothing like pressure to help a guy do well."

She grinned and shrugged. "When life forces you to shoot, there's gonna be pressure, so I guess I'm doin' you a favor."

Jericho chuckled and took his turn. Rose nodded and glowed with admiration.

CJ went next and then Nolan. Lily held her breath when her Uncle Chaz Stewart nodded at Justice. "Okay, new guy. Let's see what ya got."

The men chuckled. Lily chewed on her lip. He proceeded to shoot seventeen rounds from his Glock, then picked up a Remington 700 rifle and showed out. He

turned with a smile when he finished. “How’d I do, guys?”

Keegan nodded at him. “Not too shabby.”

Nolan laughed. “Well, that’s quite a compliment, Justice. The best I got was I shoot like a girl.”

“*That* was a compliment,” Heather said quickly.

“Oh, I realize that. With this bunch anyway,” Nolan admitted.

Heather smiled.

Justice glanced at Lily. She smiled at him. While the men finished, Justice stood next to Lily. “So, do you still feel like riding?”

“Absolutely. I mean, unless you don’t want to anymore.”

“I love to ride, and Melaynah says Santana is needing a male rider because he misses her husband.”

Lily nodded. “Jake loves that horse and that horse loves Jake.”

“When’s he comin’ home?”

“We’re not sure. He’s been gone almost five months. He’s special forces so he could be gone six to eighth months. Poor Laynah, she’s been strong, but I hope he comes home soon.”

Justice nodded. “How long have they been married?”

“They married last June and he left in September.”

“Wow, that’s tough. Only together as husband and wife for three months.”

Lily nodded but didn’t dare voice her fears. No one did. Instead they prayed for Jake every single day.

The men finished up, Justice loaded his firearms into his vehicle and headed with Lily and Daisy down toward the stables but Daisy stopped at the barn. “You guys wanna come in and say ‘hi’ to the puppies?”

“Puppies?” Justice asked. “How many?”

“There are nine, and they were born right before Thanksgiving, so they’re about seven weeks old and they are the cutest things in the whole world.”

Justice chuckled. “Well, how can I turn that down?”

Daisy laughed. “Right? Come on in.”

They headed into the barn. Lily watched as Justice transformed into a little boy in front of her eyes. He laughed and petted and played with the puppies and then asked if they were all spoken for.

Daisy nodded. “All but two. Hannah gets one, Iris gets one, Charlie and Matt get one, Brody get’s one, Heather and Nolan get one, Jericho’s guys get one, Lucas Murphy wants one and that leaves two. Why? You want one?”

Justice smiled. “How can I turn that down? Which ones are left?”

Daisy looked them over carefully. “Let’s see, that little brown and black female right there, and that mostly black female right there with the white chin and paws,” she said.

Justice lifted up one of the dogs and nuzzled it. “Hello there sweet girl,” he said. “So, you and your sister haven’t been claimed? Well, that’s lucky for me. My grandfather has a big ol’ farmhouse and he doesn’t feel right if he doesn’t have at least

four or five dogs hangin' around and his two old huntin' dogs just passed away almost a year ago. How would you like to come stay up in Kansas? I mean, it's a little colder up there, but he always has a big fire goin'."

Lily watched him stroke the puppy and found herself mesmerized. Daisy glanced at her sister and gave a soft laugh. "So, are you saying you'd like to take both of them?"

Justice nodded. "Well, I don't want to be selfish, but if no one else lays claim, I'll take them both. What about the mother?"

Daisy sighed. "My Brody wants the mother too. She's kinda special to us."

"I can certainly understand that. So, tell me, Daisy, your Brody, are you guys, like a done deal?"

Daisy's eyes opened wide. "Oh! Well, I don't know yet."

"It's just a matter of time," Lily said. "Brody has been waiting for Daisy since they were little kids, but they just started dating a month ago."

Justice nodded. "That sounds interesting."

"It is," Lily said quickly before Daisy could deny it.

Justice smiled and sighed. "You two are very cute, you know that?"

Both girls smiled.

"Well, we'd better get on down to the stable before Bugs comes lookin' for us," Lily said.

Justice set the puppy down and gave the other one a rub. "Okay, girls. See you later."

"Bye guys," Daisy called. "Enjoy your ride."

Lily and Justice headed to the stables. Laynah was just about to saddle up Santana and Justice immediately took the saddle from her. He finished saddling the horse, then turned to help Lily saddle her horse, which was a pretty brown named Honey. Melaynah saw them off and headed back to the house to help her mother with breakfast, since the twins had been fussy this morning, and she'd promised to come back and help.

Lily and Justice led their mounts out of the stable. Lily walked Honey over to the ledge near the fence that had been built by Chaz to help the children and short people get up on a horse. Justice didn't say anything. He only watched. She didn't ask for his help in some cute little way to make herself appear demure or in need of rescuing, though he wouldn't have minded it. She merely took care of business, like a woman who knew how to get along in this world. Still, she'd allowed him to help saddle her horse, which also meant it didn't bother her to allow a man to offer assistance. He smiled as he mounted Santana.

She looked over at him. "What are you smiling at? Is it because I'm short?"

He laughed and shook his head. "No. I was actually thinking of my mother. She always said that if a man wasn't around to help, a woman will find a way to take care of business."

Lily giggled. "I'm sorry. Should I have asked you to give me a boost?"

He smiled. "I wouldn't have minded, but I'm not insulted." He looked around. "So, where to?"

She nodded toward the corral. "Off that way to the spring pastures."

She kicked Honey into a canter and led the way. Once they were out in the pasture she slowed and they walked the horses side by side.

"This is nice," he said.

"It is. I'm glad you can ride."

"We have, well, my grandfather has, a stable full of horses. My father and Uncle Tim used to help take care of them, and then when they got married and had families, us grandkids also helped."

"So, you have cousins?"

"Yes. Uncle Tim is younger than my father. He married and has three kids. Two girls and a boy. The girls are in their early twenties and going to college and their brother is only eighteen. He just graduated from high school last spring."

"So, he's Gabe's age?"

Justice nodded. "Yes, and Gabe has been a big influence on him."

Lily smiled. "He does have a way of doing that." She looked at Justice. "So, what does your Uncle Tim do?"

"Well, he used to be the COO, the chief operating officer for Pure Foods. My father was the CEO, and my grandfather was what he titled, 'the TGO', The Grand Overseer."

Lily giggled.

"But now, since my father's passing, Uncle Tim is the CEO and Granddad is helping him to learn everything he needs to learn. Granddad says he's ready to retire and live on his farm with his horses and his dogs and his cattle and be self-sufficient and see what God has planned for him."

Lily sighed. "I bet you're excited to see him today. What time do you think he'll be in?"

"Well, he probably got an early start out of Memphis, so, I'm guessing he'll be here around noon."

"I can't wait to meet him."

"I can't wait for you to meet him."

"Did you tell him about the book, I mean, about Grandmaster Kino?"

"I did. He immediately got a copy of the book and read it. He's read it several more times now, and he's going to ask your father to put him in touch with Grandmaster Kino."

"That is wonderful. I wonder what God has brewing."

"What do you mean?" Justice asked.

"Well, suddenly, Grandmaster Kino is discovering that there are more people who, like him, had some kind of supernatural experience at the age of ten, who also had an angel visit them. Then recently, they found out there are twelve people. We don't know who they are yet, but we can't wait to meet them all."

Justice's brow furrowed. "If you don't know who they are, then how do you know there are twelve?"

She smiled and told him the short story of how Gabe had confirmed the number a few weeks ago.

"Interesting. Well then, I also wonder what amazing thing is coming!" He smiled. "So, do you want to run the horses a bit?"

She nodded, gave a soft command and Honey sprang forward. They raced to the back of the pasture, turned and headed back. Once the horses were taken care of, Justice drove Lily home to have breakfast with the Tanners, minus Mr. Tanner, who had to go into the Ameritech offices, and Rose and Daisy who'd already left for the Center. Iris was in her booster seat happily munching on some toast, while Violet and her mom were talking over the plans for the weekend, Violet holding Isaiah and Lizzy holding Gentian.

Nolan came in late, because he'd been working on the ranch that he and Heather bought, specifically, the house. He brightened when he saw Justice.

"Oh, great. Just the man I wanted to see. I have news for you."

"Really?" Justice said. "You have my attention."

"Good. Let's eat and I have something to show you."

Nolan grabbed a plate and went to the stove where Heather was cooking. He mounded scrambled eggs and bacon and hashbrowns onto his plate and went to sit. Heather poured him a cup of coffee and set it down next to him and kissed his cheek. But Nolan stood, took her in his arms and kissed her the way a fiancé ought to be kissed.

She giggled and pulled away. "Sit down and eat. I can't wait for you to show Justice what you found out."

"Okay," Nolan began between mouthfuls. "So, Justice, I called my Aunt Jenny. She's my father's sister. She really got into genealogy." He grabbed a piece of paper from his breast pocket and laid it down on the table. "So, my grandparents were Charles and Cynthia Sawyer, married in 1961. Charles' parents were Michael and Marie Sawyer, married in 1929. Michael's parents were Harold and June Sawyer, married in 1912. Harold's parents were Thomas and Margaret Sawyer, married in 1883, so, another Thomas! Okay, get ready. Thomas' parents were Franklin and Dorothy married in 1856. All of these people were in Tennessee. However, Franklin's parents were Knox and Bernice Sawyer, married in 1827 in Pine Forest, Georgia. We, Justice, are distant cousins."

Justice's eyes opened wide. His mouth opened wide. No sound came out.

Nolan stood up. Justice stood up. They stared into each other's eyes and then moved forward and embraced.

They then turned to smile at everyone else at the table. Lily wiped tears from her eyes. "This is amazing. I can't believe it."

Justice smiled at her. This beautiful girl whom he'd known less than a week was touched by this amazing piece of information. Her heart was sweet and beautiful and full of love and compassion.

"Well," he began. "I don't know what to say. This is an amazing piece of news. We are related," he said, nodding at Nolan.

Nolan smiled. "When we wondered if we were related, I wasn't really serious. I mean, everyone who has the same last name wonders if they're related. I didn't really

think much about it at all. But isn't it a strange coincidence that I would meet a girl from the little town of Pine Forest, and find that town is where my great, great, great, great, great grandfather was from. Where he was the mayor. It's so freaky."

"This is truly amazing," Lizzy said. "And it means something. It's more than just a strange coincidence. This is remarkable."

"Well, my grandfather is coming into town in a few hours and I can't wait to share this news with him," Justice said.

Heather sighed. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to bring our families together? I mean, your family, Nolan, and Justice's family."

"It would be wonderful."

"Hey Heather, why don't you invite Justice's side of the family to your wedding," Violet offered.

"I think that would be a wonderful idea," Heather said.

Iris sneezed. "Bless you," they all said at once, making them all laugh.

"I want to go play outside," Iris said.

"I think you might be getting a little cold," Lizzy said. "Why don't you stay inside today and rest a bit."

It concerned Lizzy, and Violet and Heather and Lily that Iris didn't even bother to argue. Instead she nodded her head, climbed down out of her booster seat and ran into the den.

"I'll go read some of Dad's books to her," Heather volunteered.

"I need to go upstairs and nurse the babies," Lizzy said

"I'll help you get them changed," Violet said.

Lily rose. "I'll take care of the breakfast dishes."

"Well, I have to get back to work," Nolan said.

Justice smiled at Lily. "I'll help you with the dishes, Lily, and then I have some business to take care of before my grandfather arrives."

✝✝✝

Genesis 17:7

"I will establish my covenant between me and you
and your descendants after you in their generations
for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you
and your descendants after you."

Chapter Thirteen

January 17th 1:00 PM EST Friday Afternoon
Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice rushed from his cabin toward the main Inn in time to meet the car. Curtis, his grandfather's driver was just pulling up. Justice smiled and waved at him before reaching to open the front passenger-side door for his grandfather.

As always, the calm loving spirit that was his grandfather overcame Justice as he helped the seventy-eight year old man from the car. He was a handsome man, healthy and strong. His brown hair and beard had gone pretty much completely white. His smile was warm and comforting, his eyes twinkled with humor and Justice found himself almost emotional as he greeted the man.

"Granddad, welcome to Pine Forest."

Thomas Sawyer smiled and pulled his grandson into a giant bear hug. He patted his back heartily as always.

Justice smiled and then pulled away and looked into his grandfather's eyes. "I missed you."

"And I you," Thomas returned.

Justice turned and held out his hand. "Curtis. Nice to see you."

"You too, Justice."

"Well, let me help you with your luggage," Justice said as he opened the back of the car and lifted out two of the largest pieces.

"Let me get that for you," John Appel said as he came out on the giant porch.

Justice shook his head. "No way."

John nodded and smiled and turned to Thomas. "Mr. Sawyer, I presume."

Thomas shook his hand. "Yes sir. It's nice to meet you."

"You as well. Welcome to the *Pine Forest Country Inn*."

"Thank you."

John turned to the other man. "And you must be Mr. Curtis Potts."

Curtis smiled and nodded. "Wow. Very good. Nice to meet you, Mr. Appel. This place looks wonderful."

John nodded. "We like to think it is. Come in, come in, you two. We have your rooms all ready." John went to the back of the car and picked up the last three pieces of luggage and headed in.

Jodi welcomed them the moment they came in the door.

"Welcome, welcome," she chirped.

Wendy, the day manager immediately checked them in and then John led them to their rooms.

"We don't have any other guests right now," John explained. "Things slow down

after the holidays. But we'll have some weekend guests checking in a little later today and we always have a large dinner crowd on the weekend thanks to our very special chef."

Justice smiled. "That chef is Lily," he put in quickly.

"She's a jewel," John said. "She always has been. Well, I've only known her since she was three, and she was always just the sweetest thing."

"Well then she hasn't changed," Justice said before he could stop himself.

John and Thomas both smiled.

"Lunch is being served right now," John informed them. "And Dinner begins at 5:00. However, you're welcome to come down to the kitchen anytime and we'll be happy to find you something to snack on, or something to drink, or just serve up some conversation."

"You people are very friendly," Thomas said. "There is definitely a difference between the south and the rest of the country."

John smiled. "There is. I hear a lot of people say that the southern hospitality thing is just a front, but I've found it to be very real. They might be all into your business, but they genuinely care."

"Oh, so, you're not a southerner?"

"I was born and raised in California," John said. "And I can tell you, I truly love living in the south."

John backed out of the door of Thomas' room. "If you can think of anything you need, please let us know. There are extra blankets on that shelf over there, and plenty of towels. There's a brochure on the table there of all the things you can do or experience here in Pine Forest."

"Thank you so much, John. Justice told me about your martial arts class. Does your offer include that?"

"Well, um, yessir. Of course."

Thomas laughed. "Don't worry. I'm stronger than I look."

John smiled. "Okay, then, I won't worry."

John left and Thomas looked at Justice. "Well, son, I might want to settle in and rest a bit. But first, let's have a little talk."

Justice came in and took a seat on the bed. Thomas sat down on the large chair across from the bed. He smiled. "So far, I really like this place."

Justice smiled. "Me too. There's something about the air here. Fresh. Clean. Pine. Wood fire. Home cooking."

"So, Justice, have you been back to the house again?"

"Yes sir. A few times. Just a quick walk through. Lily gave me a set of keys so I can go over whenever I get the urge."

"She sounds like a thoughtful young lady."

"Yes sir, she is. Thoughtful and sweet and kind and beautiful."

"That's an excellent combination."

Justice nodded.

"So, have you prayed about what the Lord wants you to accomplish here?"

"Yes sir, I have. But He's not talking to me right now."

Thomas frowned. "I'm thinking it's more like you're not listening."

"I am," Justice argued.

Thomas frowned and sighed, closed his eyes as if in prayer and then opened them. "What did I tell you needed to be done when we read the journals and learned about the house? What did I say God told me had to be done?"

Justice sighed. "You said we had to come back here to Pine Forest and reclaim the house and fill it with God's light and love and expel any darkness. You said the darkness has been after our family for eight generations. You said they want to put out our light. Extinguish it."

Thomas nodded. "Very good. And so, what did you come here to do? I mean specifically?"

"Well, originally, I came here to buy the house and restore it and bless it and fill it with light."

"But now?"

"Well, I don't see how Jesus would want me to come here and take away the dreams of a lovely young girl."

Thomas nodded again. "Okay. And that means what?"

Justice thought. "That means I can't buy the house. So that puts us back to square one."

"Why?"

"Because I can't buy the house."

"Did I say to buy the house?"

"Well, you said to reclaim it."

"What does 'reclaim it' mean?" Thomas asked.

"To— um, take it back?"

"Take it back from whom or what?"

"Obviously from the dark forces that seem to be occupying the place."

Thomas nodded. "Correct. So tell me, do you think those dark forces care whose name is on the deed?"

Justice frowned. "Oh, well, no. They're gonna be there no matter whose name is on the deed."

"Right, so do you really need to buy it in order to reclaim it?"

"Um, I guess not."

"Did Lily give you the keys to the place?"

"Yes."

"Then what is the problem?"

"Well, I don't want her to be a part of something as volatile as removing dark forces from that house."

"She's already a part of it. She's been drawn to that house since she was a kid, correct?"

"Yes. But again, I don't want her to be hurt in any way."

"Then you'll have to protect her. It looks to me like you're gonna have to protect

her anyway."

Justice nodded.

"What did I say to you on the phone about this situation?"

"You said something confusing about all this being a means to an end."

"What do you think I meant by that?"

Justice sighed. "Well, sir, I don't really know."

"Okay. What is the means?"

He shook his head. "Well, I guess, the means is to come here to Pine Forest."

Thomas nodded. "You're almost there. Come here to Pine Forest to do what?"

"Come here to battle the dark forces in that house and reclaim it?"

"Right. But what has the end become?"

He sighed and shrugged.

"What has happened instead of you coming here to reclaim the house?"

He frowned. "Nothing has happened, because when I came here to reclaim it, instead I found Lily Tanner owns the home."

Thomas smiled. "Right."

"Right?"

"Justice, the end has been Lily Tanner."

Justice shook his head as he tried to see what his grandfather was trying to say. His eyes opened wide. "So, you're saying God telling us to come here to reclaim this house was the means, and the end was me meeting Lily Tanner? That's what you mean by a means to an end?"

"Correct, and I've never known you to be so dense, son."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be dense. But I came here to fulfill a mission for you and our family, or what's left of them, and I was trying to keep my mind on the job and not get distracted by a beautiful girl."

Thomas smiled. "And *I* think the Lord was counting on you being distracted."

"You're saying God wanted me to find Lily?"

"Yes. I've prayed extensively on this, Justice, and I think the Lord wants you and Lily to work together to fill that house with light and love."

Justice nodded. "You know, she said it was her dream, to open a little restaurant, call it *Lily's Place*, and fill it with light and love using food and music." He sat silently for several moments as he thought. "I guess I could ask her if she would allow me to help her open her place. Maybe she would let me go into business with her."

Thomas frowned. Justice and Lily had business together alright but it was more than just a restaurant, and Thomas couldn't figure out why Justice seemed so blind to the obvious. Still, he needed to come upon the idea for himself.

"Why are you frowning, Granddad?"

"There is more to this than going into business with Lily. I want you to continue to pray and open your mind to all possibilities, okay?"

"Yes, of course."

Thomas nodded. "Okay then. Let me get settled and take a quick nap. Will you go downstairs and ask the Appels if they would set aside some lunch for me when I get up."

"Yes. Curtis too?"

Thomas shook his head. "No. Curtis will take care of his own wants and needs. He doesn't like me to coddle him, or so he recently told me."

Justice smiled. Curtis Potts was once a homeless drugged out shell of a man that his grandfather took off the streets. He is now healthy, happy, educated and has a wife and three grown kids. "So, where is Carla while you and Curtis are gallivanting around?" Justice asked.

"She's visiting with their oldest daughter."

"Oh, that's nice. Okay, so lunch for you when you get up. Shall I have them bring it up to you in about an hour, or will you go down?"

"I'll go down." He smiled. "See you soon, Justice. Go pray."

Justice smiled. "On my way."

✝✝✝

January 17th 8:30 PM EST Friday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily smiled and placed her hand over her heart as the entire dinner crowd stood and applauded her. The Macaroni and Brie with Crab, the Seared Scallops and Baby Spinach with Spiced Pomegranate Glaze, Skirt Steak with Pineapple Salsa and Chicken Marsala Risotto was all amazing. Jodi told her she'd outdone herself. Lily felt relieved, because she'd been nervous about cooking for Justice's grandfather. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Justice held his hand out to her. "Can you come sit a minute with us?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'm done. My crew will finish off the night for me."

"Wonderful." Justice turned to his grandfather, who was standing next to him. "Lily Tanner, I'd like you to meet my grandfather, Thomas Sawyer."

Lily held out her hand and smiled. "Mr. Sawyer, it's so nice to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you."

Thomas smiled. "And I've heard about you too, young lady. That was a magnificent meal. I'm very impressed."

Lily smiled. "Thank you, sir. I'm so glad you liked it."

"Let's sit in the lobby," Thomas suggested.

The two men ushered Lily to a grouping near the fireplace. Thomas smiled at Lily. "My goodness you are a beautiful young lady."

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, well, thank you sir. We look like our mother, I mean, my twin and older sisters and I, we look almost exactly like our mother."

"And I understand your father died before you were born."

"Yes sir. He was in the military."

"So then, Keegan Tanner is the only father you've ever known."

"Yes sir."

"I met him briefly today. He's a very impressive man."

"Yes sir, he is. We are very grateful to have him as our father."

"Do you ever tell him that?"

"Granddad," Justice said firmly.

Lily smiled. “It’s okay. It’s a good question and the answer is ‘yes’ I tell him that *every* day. We all do. We love him with a powerful love. He’s a good strong man who takes very good care of his family and loves God with his whole soul. My sisters and I, our goal has always been to eventually find a man like him.” She glanced at Justice.

He smiled at her. “Those are some hard shoes to fill,” he said softly.

She nodded. “They are, but four of my sisters have been blessed to find someone that measures up so it’s not impossible.”

“That is wonderful,” Thomas said. “And how about you?”

She glanced at Justice. “I, um, I’m single right now.”

“Granddad, let’s not get too personal.”

“You’re right, son. Sorry, I guess I’m a little smitten with such a beautiful and talented young lady.”

“Well, Granddad, I’m sure Lily is tired after working so hard. Lily, let me walk you home.”

“Oh! Yes, of course. Let me grab my things and I’ll meet you at the door.”

“Sounds good.”

“Mr. Sawyer, it was a pleasure meeting you. I hope you’ll stay for awhile and maybe come to dinner at our house one day.”

“I would be delighted and I *will* be staying awhile. And by the way, tomorrow I’d like to go by and see our ancestral home.”

“Of course. You’re welcome there anytime and like I told Justice, I will sell it back to you if you’d like. I understand its importance for you.”

“I wouldn’t dream of taking that place away from you and I’m looking forward to seeing what you do with it.”

Lily frowned, but nodded. “Well, I’m not sure anymore, but I’ll let you know.” She smiled at Justice. “I’ll get my things.”

Justice watched her go. He sighed. She was indeed beautiful, and not just physically. He frowned at his grandfather. “Granddad, I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but don’t you think you came on a little strong?”

Thomas smiled. “Perhaps. Though it wasn’t accidental. It was on purpose. What an amazing young lady she is, don’t ya think?”

Justice sighed. “Yes, I think she’s amazing. I’ve only known her five days. We’ve spent the majority of that time together. Eating together, meeting her family, visiting all the places in town, shooting guns, riding horses, even martial arts classes. The more I get to know her, the more amazing I think she is.”

Thomas nodded. “Well good then. I’m glad to know you aren’t completely dead inside.”

Justice sighed. “Granddad, sometimes I feel dead inside. I mean, since the accident. But when I’m around Lily, I don’t feel that sadness or that weight anymore. I feel like I can breathe again. But listen Granddad, you gotta let me do this on my own. I’m letting God lead me. Please don’t be so pushy.”

Thomas smiled. “Okay. I’ll back off. But if you need any help in any way, I’m here for you, son.”

"Thank you, Granddad. I love you. I'm grateful for you and I trust you. I prayed like you asked me to do earlier today. I prayed all afternoon."

"Wonderful. Did God speak to you?"

Justice offered a tiny smile. "He did, actually. I fell asleep and had a very specific dream."

"Oh! Wonderful. What did you dream?"

"Well, I won't go into detail, but it involved Lily. Part of it was not good. There was something happening and we were all very sad. But then part of it was, um, I'll just say it was a very erotic situation."

"How delightful!"

Justice rolled his eyes. "Granddad, you are a trip."

"And a half young man. A trip and a half."

Justice pushed his chair in. "I'll talk to you in the morning." He patted his grandfather on the shoulder and headed to the front door of the Inn. He heard the first part of the next conversation as he walked away.

"Hello there. My name is Tom Sawyer."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. Not kidding. I'm from Kansas. Where are you from?"

Justice smiled. He found Lily at the front door, minus her apron and grabbing her coat. He took it from her and held it for her.

"Thank you," she said sweetly.

"You're welcome."

She took her hat from the pocket of her coat and pulled it on over her ears. "It's pretty cold outside tonight," she explained.

He grinned. "If you say so."

"It's 38º, and it's going down to 27º by morning!"

He chuckled. "Oh my goodness, whatever will we do?"

She giggled as he opened the door for her, they stepped out into the cold air and she shivered immediately. He stepped in front of her and wrapped her scarf up under her adorable chin, tugged her hat farther down over her ears, zipped her coat to the very top and took her hand. "No gloves?"

"I forgot them."

He took one of her hands and stuffed it into her pocket and took her left hand and held it between his own.

She blinked up at him, her eyes filled with innocence and humor. He smiled. It seemed that she always made him smile.

They walked slowly down the walk that lead past the cottages and to the big iron gate that opened to her property. Well, her parent's property.

"What did you think of my grandfather?" he asked.

"I think he's a lovely man. I can tell he's quite wise and humble and maybe a little naughty. He has a twinkle in his eye, kind of like Santa Claus is pictured."

Justice chuckled. "That's a perfect description, except Granddad is not fat, though he *is* usually very jolly. He thinks you are not only a great chef but an amazing young

lady. His words."

"Aww, that's sweet."

He nodded and squeezed her hand as he walked along beside her. He knew his grandfather was suggesting that the Lord was leading Justice to find Lily. He'd prayed about it earlier today and had to admit, he pretty much felt he'd received a confirmation. He was trying to fight it. Why? Why was he hesitating? The moment he'd laid eyes on her he'd been completely enchanted. Watching her sing a song about her last chance at love. Watching her backside sway as she sang. Watching her fall over and try to draw on him. He smiled. This girl was the sweetest spirit of anyone he'd ever met. She immediately wanted to sell her dream house to him once she'd heard his story. She didn't play coy games. She was down-to-earth and skilled in so many things. Cooking. Singing. Shooting. Riding. She even quoted Bible verses. She was amazing.

Why was he trying to fight this attraction? Did he feel like he wasn't worthy? Maybe a little. Did he feel like it wasn't the right time? His grandfather had rid him of that notion. He had a job to do, but he shouldn't exclude Lily. She was deeply involved. Apparently she has been since she was a kid. Which meant God had a plan for her and apparently, he was part of that plan for her. Which meant she was part of the plan for him and he suddenly realized, that news made him feel happy. Happy? Wow, he'd hadn't felt real happiness in seven months.

He realized they were approaching her big iron gate, but he realized he didn't want to take her home just yet. He grabbed her wrist and jerked her back. She stood facing him now, her brows raised, her smile in place.

"What is it?" she asked.

He didn't speak. He looked deeply into her eyes, then slowly and gently placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Justice?" she asked again.

He stepped forward, so close to her now that she had to tilt her face up to look at him. His heart was beating a million beats a minute.

She was just about to ask him again what was wrong when he grabbed her face in both hands and kissed her fiercely. She gasped as she realized what was happening. It was not tender or gentle or soft like one would imagine a first kiss to be. He turned his head slightly and kissed her deeply, roughly, passionately. Finally, he pulled away.

Staring into her big, blue eyes, he took a step back. "Sorry."

She shook her head. "Don't be sorry."

"Okay, I won't be." He moved forward to kiss her again. This time he was a little gentler.

She sighed and wrapped her arms up around his neck. He grunted and lifted her off the sidewalk and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He held her tight and turned and leaned her against the black iron fence. It was a long time before he lowered her back down to the ground and finally relinquished the kiss. As soon as he did, he kissed her again.

When he finally stepped back, Lily looked up at his handsome face. "What's goin' on, Justice?" she asked softly.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. I felt like my heart was beating out of my chest and I knew that I had to kiss you or I might die.”

She touched his cheek. “Don’t die,” she said softly.

He smiled. “Are you upset?” he asked.

“No. I was surprised, but I’m not upset at all. That kiss, I mean, I’ve never, I mean, I guess it’s silly to admit this but that is really the first real kiss I’ve ever had. I mean, I’ve kissed boys before, when I was in high school and one guy in college, but those little kisses, they were more like an experiment, or a trial or maybe research.”

“Well, I wasn’t researching or experimenting,” Justice said quickly.

“I get that. This felt different. It felt like, I don’t know how to explain it. A rush of feelings and emotions. Real feelings. It was actually beautiful.”

He chuckled. “A real kiss *is* beautiful. You are very innocent.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“That is *very* good,” he murmured as he ran his thumb over her cheek.

He took her hand. “Lily, will you come to my cabin with me so that we can talk?” He glanced at his watch. “It’s not even nine yet. I’m not trying to take advantage of you. I just feel like we need some privacy so we can talk about some things. What do you think?”

She nodded with a smile. “Okay.”

He took her hand and led her to Cottage #1 and opened the door for her.

Once inside he quickly adjusted the heat so she could get warm. Taking her coat, hat and scarf he tossed them over the arm of the sofa.

Her phone rang and she smiled and answered. “Hey, Daddy.”

“What’s goin’ on?”

“We just needed a place to talk quietly.”

“Talk, huh?”

“Yes sir. Talk.”

“Is that real talk or the kind of talking you were doing at the gate?”

Her face turned pink. “Oh, wow, Dad, I forgot there are cameras on the gate.”

Justice sighed heavily at that news. That was just great.

“Put Justice on the phone.”

Lily smiled and held her phone out to put it on speaker. “Okay, Daddy, go ahead, he can hear you.”

“Justice?”

“Yes sir.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“We just wanted to talk privately a bit. And yes sir, I kissed her at the gate. I’m sorry. Well, to be absolutely honest, sir, I’m not sorry. But I promise you, Lily is safe with me. I would never do anything to compromise her. Not ever. I care too much about her and I have too much respect for her and for you and Mrs. Tanner. And I don’t want to disappoint God. I give you my word, sir.”

Keegan sighed. “I believe you. Try not to keep her out too late.”

“Yes sir.”

"And if it IS too late, walk her all the way to the front door."

"Yes sir. Absolutely sir."

"Bye, Daddy," Lily said sweetly and ended the call. She looked at Justice. "Sorry about that."

"You don't have to apologize for a man who obviously loves his daughter." He sighed. "Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head. "Not a thing." She sat on the blue sofa and patted the place next to her. "Come talk to me."

He smiled. She was so darn cute. He sat next to her and then turned so he could see her face. "Lily, about the house."

She frowned. "Oh, you wanna talk about the house?"

He nodded. "Yes, what did you think I wanted to talk to you about?"

She shrugged. "About kissing me so suddenly. Maybe about how you feel about me."

He smiled. "You are so up-front and honest and I do wanna talk to you about that too. But first things first, okay?"

She nodded and smiled. "Okey dokey, first things first."

He laughed. "Good grief you are just too cute."

"You are too."

He sighed. He wasn't getting anywhere fast. He cleared his head. "So Lily, I think I've finally come up with a solution where we can fulfill both my mission and your dream."

She nodded. "Go ahead."

"It requires us to spend a good bit of time together."

She smiled. "Go ahead."

"Okay, so, Granddad believes, and I tend to agree with him, that God meant for you and I to meet here and work on this project together. You've been in on this house since you were a kid, so, with that in mind, will you allow me to stick around and help you to renovate the house into *Lily's Place*?"

"So, you want *me* to keep the house?"

"Yes. I cannot in good conscience take it away from you. But I want to be part of restoring it. That's all I really need. I need to be a part of the restoration and a part of reclaiming the place from the dark forces, from the demons who have taken up residence there."

"You think there are really demons there?" she asked.

"I do. They already tried taking us out. That is not just bad energy. Those are demons. And since you know and understand that Jesus is real, and He regularly cast out demons, you must know that they exist and we can cast them out so that they can do no more harm to my family."

"Do you think we can do this quickly and easily?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. Granddad came because he believes it's gonna be harder than we originally expected. But I think together we can do it. My family, your gigantic family, get Gabe's prayer warriors involved, the Appels and the Stewarts and maybe your

Pastor. We can do it."

"Good. Let's do it."

"Okay. And I want to stick around and help you renovate. I won't try to boss you around or tell you what to do. Just whatever you want to do, I'll help you do it or hire someone to do it."

"The Kinos gave me the money to renovate."

He nodded. "Okay. Well, that's fine, I guess, but don't worry about *any* costs because I'd like to at least *help* pay for the renovation of the home that used to belong to *my* family."

She frowned.

"And I promise to not try to do things my way just because I'm footing the bill. Or part of the bill. I hope most of the bill and you can donate what the Kinos gave you to a good cause."

She nodded. "But if I wanted your input, you would give it to me?"

"Well, yes, of course."

She shrugged. "I'd like to talk to my parents first."

He nodded. "I understand. I want you to talk to them first."

She smiled. "Still, I think it's a good plan. I think you're right and I hope it will accomplish both of our goals."

"You seem skeptical. What are you skeptical about?"

"Well, it's not exactly skeptical. I just hope I can fill it up with light and love like your grandfather asked you to do."

"I have no doubt about that. You are a light, Lily. A very bright light. So bright, I'm like a moth to flame. I can't stop looking at your light."

She giggled. "That's sweet. Is that why you kissed me?"

He smiled. "I suppose it is. At least part of it. You are a very special girl, Lily. Since I met you, I can't get enough of you. I find I think about you first thing in the morning. I find I think about you before I go to sleep. I think about you at odd times during the day."

"What do you think?"

"Well, I mean, I think about your sweet smile, and your bright eyes and your even temperament, and your kindness, and the way you dance and sing when you think no one is watching. Earlier, I was watching you and thinking that I don't think I've ever met a girl as amazing as you and the urge to kiss you was so strong, I had to do it. I know I didn't even ask permission. But for some reason I got the feeling, you wanted me to kiss you."

"I did."

His eyebrows shot up and then he laughed at her honesty and her innocence. "You're not supposed to tell a guy that."

She shrugged. "Why not? I don't like playing silly games. I like you, Justice and I think you're a great guy. You're kind and such a gentleman, and yet you're strong and capable, and mostly, you seem to love God and that's the most important thing. And I was just telling Daisy last night what I thought about you and I wondered if you thought

good things about me and I wondered if you would ever kiss me and if so would you like it and would you want to do it again, or would you think, yuk, nope, not as good as I thought."

He chuckled. "That is not what I thought."

She grinned. "What did you think, then?"

"I thought I wanted to do it again and again and never stop."

"That sounds nice. Like I said, I don't think I've ever been really kissed. I mean, except for experimental. I don't think anyone has ever kissed me just because they like me."

"Well, I wasn't experimenting. I like you, Lily. A whole lot."

She sighed. "When you kissed me, the feelings that like, welled up inside, the emotions, it was very cool. No wonder all of my sisters are always kissing their guys. They say it's one of the most wonderful feelings they've ever felt."

He nodded in agreement and took a deep breath because she was making it very hard to not do it again.

She was looking into his eyes. She licked her lips. He sincerely hoped her father wasn't about to come charging in the door, because he was about to give in. He shook his head in defeat. Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her over to sit in his lap, tilted her chin up and kissed her. This time it was gentle and tender like a first kiss should be. He kissed her over and over until he was sated and just held her close there on the blue sofa. She turned a bit and laid her head on his chest and closed her eyes and again, it hit him. He was happy. Holding this beautiful sweet girl close against him, he was happy. "Thank you, Jesus," he whispered, his eyes moistening. He thought he'd never feel anything even close to happiness again, but God does indeed take away the pain. That relief brought on the emotions and he closed his eyes in defense.

She opened her eyes suddenly, with a slight gasp.

"What's wrong, Lily? Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine. I just started to fall asleep."

He thought a minute. "Well, you've had a long day. I hate to say it, but I need to get you home."

"So soon?"

"If we stay here any longer we'll probably both fall asleep and I don't want your father to come looking for you in the middle of the night. I want him to know he can trust me."

Lily sighed. "You're right."

He hugged her tight, kissed her one more time, rose and pulled her to her feet. He then grabbed her coat and scarf and hat and bundled her up as if she were a child. He touched her nose when she smiled up at him. "You are just really too cute," he said.

She giggled. "Hey, before we leave, you wanna see something *really* cute?"

He smiled. "Tell me it's in a private place."

She laughed. "Oh, I guess it is. Come here." She headed into the bathroom, opened the cabinet door and pointed to the pipe under the sink. In pink fingernail polish it said 'Lily,' only the 'Ls' were backward.

He laughed. “Well, you’re right that *is* cute. Very cute. How in the world did that come to be here?”

“Well, when our family first moved down here to Pine Forest, we actually stayed in this cabin while my father built our house.”

“All of you?”

“Yes. Mom and Dad stayed in the bedroom you’re staying in, and we girls squished into the second bedroom. We were very little. I was only three, but Daisy and I turned four while we were here, and, here’s an interesting nugget, I was almost murdered while we were here.”

“What?”

She nodded. “Yep. Some man had been hired to rape my mom by one of the bad guys that Dad put behind bars. He came to get my mom but didn’t want her because she was eight and a half months pregnant with Gabe, and I was already outside and so he beat up my mom and took me instead.”

He reached out and touched her face. “Lily, how did you get away?”

“Dad chased the guy down and threatened to put a hole in his forehead and he gave up and let me go. Dad and I got back just in time to see little baby Gabriel being born, because when the guy beat up my mom, he kicked her in the stomach and put her into labor. She had Gabe right out there in the far front corner of the parking lot.”

“Wow, Lily. It seems weird to think that I almost didn’t get to meet you.”

“Well, Justice, if you and I meeting was part of God’s plan, then He surely had the power to make sure I survived long enough to get to meet you. I mean, who knows, maybe I was the one taken because the demons that are after your family were trying to not let you and I meet. But we overcame and here we are. Isn’t it kind of cool?”

He nodded. “It is very cool, sweet Lily. Come on, let’s get you home.”

They walked out to the gate. She put in the code.

“So, where are the cameras?” Justice asked.

Lily smiled. “They’re so little you can barely see them. See those bolts, there and over there? Those are really cameras.”

Justice nodded and smiled at the cameras just in case her father was watching. He walked her down the long drive and to her front door.

“Well, good night Lily. It’s been an amazing day.”

She nodded and smiled at him. He knew she was expecting a goodnight kiss and he was happy to give it to her. When he finally pulled away, she opened her front door using a code and turned. “Bye, Justice. See you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Lily. I’m looking forward to it.”

Upstairs, Keegan backed up the video on his phone and showed it to his wife with a smile. “Looks like our Lily is not the odd man out anymore.”

Lizzy watched the video. She saw a very nice young man softly kiss her daughter and push her gently inside to safety. She smiled. “I like him.”

Keegan nodded. “I do too. He’s been through a lot and yet he has it in his heart to have feelings for our daughter.”

“Yep. And it looks like they finally figure out what was right in front of their

faces," Lizzy said.

Keegan nodded. "Well, let's talk to Lily in the morning and see just what they discussed this evening. Don't wanna jump the gun."

Lizzy sighed. "Ya know, Keegan, the babies are seven and a half weeks old."

He nodded. "Yes, I know. They're already growing up so fast."

"Yes, babies tend to do that, but Keegan, what I mean is, well, it's been a long time since..."

He looked over at his beautiful wife and finally grasped her meaning. "Are you sure you're feeling okay?"

"Yes, Keegan, I'm feeling more than okay. I'm feeling wonderful and healthy and fit, but I'm feeling lonely."

"Well, my sweet Elizabeth, I am so sorry that I made you have to ask. My beautiful wife wants me to make love to her, and I promise, sweetheart, you won't have to ask me again," he said as he snuggled up to her and took her in his arms.

✝✝✝

January 18th, 12:01 AM PST Wee Hours of Saturday Morning

Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

Gabe yelled out loud and came immediately awake with a giant gasp. He sat straight up, his eyes wide.

"Tanner? You okay?" one of the agents asked from across the room.

Gabe threw his covers off and swung his legs to the floor. "I, I had a dream. Only it wasn't just a dream," he said as he jumped from his bed, went to his locker grabbed some pants and started hopping on one foot to get them on quickly.

"What's goin' on?" another agent asked.

"I gotta find the Commander," Gabe said loudly. "How do I find the Commander? Does anyone know how to get hold of the Commander?"

"I know he spends the night sometimes, on the first floor."

Gabe grabbed some shoes and pulled them on and then grabbed up his phone and called home.

"Gabe? You okay?" Keegan asked.

"Dad, how can I reach the Commander?"

"You can't but I can. What's goin' on?"

"I had a dream. I gotta go to him," Gabe said, almost yelling as he grabbed his gun, chambered it and stuffed it in his waistband.

"What did you dream?" his father asked.

"Four things. A delivery at the front gate. It's for Commander Edwards. It's a bomb. Go now! That's what I got."

"Okay, Gabe hold on now..."

"No sir. I can't hold on. I gotta go. Here, I'm giving my phone to the other agents here. Tell them what to do."

Gabe tossed his phone to Agent Hall. "Here, it's my dad, talk to him and do what he tells you to do."

Gabe grabbed his keys and took off. He charged down the stairs. There was a guard

at the front door. He rose as Gabe approached.

"Tanner. Don't know where you're goin' this time of night, but if you leave it will be reported."

Gabe nodded as he jerked the door open. "No problem. I gotta go, it's an emergency," he yelled back over his shoulder as he dashed across the parking lot, jumped in his car and took off. He flew through the compound toward the front gate. He pulled up to park next to the front gate and was relieved to see the Commander walking toward the entrance of the gate building. He also saw a UPS truck parked on the other side of the building at the gate. Gabe jumped out of his car. "Commander, wait!"

Samuel Edwards turned briefly. "Agent Tanner, I'll be with you in a moment." He headed to the door and touched his card to the sensor.

"No, Commander, wait," Gabe yelled loudly as he ran toward the man.

The man held up a finger and started in, but Gabe got to him, came up behind him and grabbed him with both arms around his waist.

"Tanner, have you lost your mind?"

"It's a bomb, sir," Gabe yelled loudly. "It's a bomb!"

"What are you t..."

The blast was deafening. The Commander and Gabe both went flying backwards and bricks and wood and other debris landed on top of them. It took several seconds before Gabe could hear anything.

"Commander, are you okay? Commander Edwards, please talk to me."

The man grunted. "I'm alive," he said weakly. He immediately tried to rise up but groaned in pain.

"Lie still," Gabe said breathlessly, because the Commander was lying halfway on top of Gabe. Gabe was terrified that Agent Booth would have taken the brunt of the explosion because he was probably right by the gate window. The Commander was moving, trying to clear the debris off of him and they both looked up to see a man in a brown UPS uniform climb over the debris toward them. He had a gun, but at least it was pointed at the ground.

Gabe was trying to reach into his waistband and grab his gun, but with the Commander on top of him, it was making it extremely difficult. He thought he could hear sirens in the distance and was grateful for that.

"As always, Sam, you make it through alive," the man said.

Sam groaned. "Ken, have you totally lost it?"

"Totally. And I'm taking you with me. You destroyed my life, Sam. You were supposed to be a friend."

"YOU destroyed your own life, Ken. I couldn't stand by and watch you hurt others. You tried to send an innocent boy to prison for killing a kid that you know good and well you killed. I had to stop you."

"Cops don't rat out other cops."

"Ken, cops obey the law, or they're supposed to anyway. Why couldn't you just obey the law?"

Gabe finally worked his hand inside his waistband far enough to grip the gun with

his fingers.

"I needed the money, man. You just don't get it. I needed the money."

"You're right. I don't get it."

"That's fine. It's all about to be over anyway. You'd already be dead if not for this kid screaming about it being a bomb. I had to go ahead and detonate it." He nodded at Gabe. "How'd you know, anyway?"

"Jesus told me."

Ken laughed and answered with a crude remark, then added, "Looks like I'm about to kill another kid."

"Ken, don't do this. Think of Jillian and the boys."

"My wife left me and took my kids."

"Oh, Ken, I'm sorry about that. But you have to take responsibility for your own actions. YOU caused that, not me."

"Yeah, because you're some kind of saint, right?"

"No, Ken, I'm no saint. I've made plenty of mistakes and I've owned up to them. That's the difference."

Ken raised his gun.

"Ken wait, my wife, she's finally pregnant. Please think..."

"Sorry, Sammy boy. You gotta take your medicine." He aimed his gun at Sam's head and started to pull the trigger.

Three shots rang out. Breathing hard, Gabe laid his gun down by his side. "I'm sorry," he said softly as Ken fell lifelessly, three holes in his chest.

At that moment sirens blaring, police and paramedics and fire trucks and bomb squads arrived. Agents also arrived, swarming the scene.

Red, blue and black teams began removing debris off of Gabe and the Commander. They pulled the Commander to his feet.

Gabe yelled at them. "Someone go see about Agent Booth!"

"I'm right here," Booth said breathlessly as he was being helped out of the mess. "You saved me, Gabe. I heard you yell 'it's a bomb' and I dove into the front corner of the booth just in time. Most of the blast went right past me."

Gabe sighed in relief, but looked him over. "It doesn't look like the blast missed you."

"A part of the front wall fell on me. I'm just scratched up and I might have twisted my ankle. That's it, thanks to you."

Gabe sighed. He was suddenly very tired. "Commander Edwards?" he called.

"Over here. I'm okay, also thanks to you."

Agent Hall from Gabe's Red team handed Gabe his phone. "Here, Tanner, your dad wants to speak with you."

Gabe took the phone. "Hey Dad."

"Son. Your mother wants to hear your voice."

"Gabe?"

"Hi Mom. I'm okay. Almost everyone is okay."

"Almost everyone?"

Gabe sighed. “I— had to kill a man.” He hadn’t expected the emotions to well up. It took him by surprise. His voice broke.

Keegan cleared his throat. “You did what you had to do, Gabe. Take a deep breath. Stay in prayer. It’s a hard thing, but God will give you peace.”

Gabe sniffed. “The guy was gonna kill Commander Edwards. I had to do it. He was gonna kill me too. And he didn’t care that the bomb had probably killed Agent Booth, though he dove for cover and is okay.”

“Agent Tanner, the police need a statement from you,” an officer said.

“Mom, Dad, I gotta go. But I’m okay. So, give everyone a hug for me. The twins and Iris too.”

“I will,” Lizzy said. “Oh, and honey, Iris is sick. It’s just a little cold, but she would be so happy to hear from you. Maybe later, you could Facetime with her?”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll be happy to do that for my little flower girl. Tell her she’d better get well and tell her she’s breaking the rules.”

Lizzy smiled. “I’ll tell her. Bye, honey. And I’m so proud of you, Gabriel. I love you so much.”

“Thanks, Mom, love you too. Good night, Dad.”

“Good night, son.”

✝✝✝

Job 33:14-15

“For God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not.
In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep
falleth upon men, in slumberings upon the bed;”

Chapter Fourteen

January 18th 7:00 AM EST Saturday Morning
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan slept in a little later than usual, but only a little. He rose with pep in his step and just in time to help with breakfast. Lizzy too, woke up smiling and happy. They had a big breakfast planned. She hummed as she nursed the babies and then woke Iris, who'd slept late, Lizzy was sure, because of the lingering cold.

In the kitchen, the family was brought up to date about Gabe's dream and the bomb, which, given the time difference, happened just four hours earlier. They all expressed their gratitude that Gabe, his Commander and Agent Booth had all survived with only minor injuries. They complained a little bit that Gabe went running off without a plan. But Rose pointed out, what else was he supposed to do? The only alternative would be to take time to plan and maybe not get there in time. Gabe was given a dream, he acted immediately and lives were saved, except for the one Gabe had to dispatch. There was so much for which to be grateful.

Today would be an interesting day. They would get to meet Thomas Sawyer and together, the Sawyers and the Tanners were going to visit the old Sawyer home. Lizzy though, would stay home with Isaiah and Gentian and little Iris who was not only sneezing and had a runny nose, but was coughing now too. She decided that if Iris wasn't feeling better by Monday morning, they were headed straight into the doctor.

As Lizzy coaxed some herbal tea and honey down little Iris, Lily and her sisters were busy laughing and cooking a large breakfast. They were making their special pancakes with raw butter and real maple syrup, thick sliced nitrate-free bacon, cage free eggs made to order, a fruit cup made of last summer's berries, and a variety of beverages including coffee, several different teas, raw milk, juices, or just plain well-water.

Right on time, Justice and his grandfather arrived at the front door.

Keegan answered it and warmly invited the two men in, shaking hands heartily with both Justice and Thomas Sawyer.

"Mr. Tanner," Thomas said. "I've heard so much about you. It's an honor to meet you."

"Mr. Sawyer, please call me Keegan and I've heard a lot about you too and it is indeed an honor to meet you. Please come in, make yourselves at home. The girls are cooking up a storm for you."

"Well, if it tastes as good as it smells, I'll be in heaven."

"Not only will it, Granddad," Justice said. "It will all be good for you. No antibiotics, all organic, free range, cage free, raw, non-GMO etc. These are the kind of people that your father started *Pure Foods* for."

Thomas smiled and nodded because he thought that was wonderful.

They were ushered into the kitchen. It was filled with beautiful women.

Lily immediately sought out Justice. Their eyes met and she smiled.

"Mr. Sawyer," Keegan began. "This is my wife, Elizabeth."

Thomas smiled at the beautiful woman and she offered her hand to him which he took and pressed between his two hands.

"Hello, Mr. Sawyer. Please call me Lizzy. Most everyone does."

He nodded. "Lizzy it is, then. I have to say, you look like you're one of the girls. I was thinking you must be the oldest sister."

Lizzy giggled, which made Keegan smile.

"That's a very kind thing to say to a mother of nine children."

Thomas shrugged. "And that fact is also amazing."

"Well, Mr. Sawyer, it's very nice to meet you. Your grandson has charmed us all. You must be very proud of him."

"I am indeed."

The others moved forward then to introduce themselves. Heather, Rose, Violet, Daisy and finally Lily.

"Mr. Sawyer, nice to see you again. I hope you slept well at the Inn."

He smiled at the girl who'd caught his grandson's attention. "The Inn is a haven and I slept very well, thank you."

"Breakfast is ready," Lily said softly. She rattled off the menu. "I just need to know how you like your eggs."

"Over light would be nice," he said.

"We're doing this buffet style," Lizzy said. "So grab a plate over there and fill it up as much as you want along the island there."

Keegan nodded. "Mr. Sawyer, we'd be honored to have you bless the food."

Thomas smiled and offered a beautiful blessing on the food, the family and the home. While everyone served themselves, Justice made his way to Lily where she was at the stove, cooking eggs to order.

"Good morning," he said softly.

She looked up at him. And then looked around at everyone else. It seemed the whole family had quieted and were watching them.

She looked back up into Justice's eyes. "Um, so, it's nice to see you."

He nodded. "You too." He looked around and rolled his eyes, then quickly bent down and kissed her cheek.

Lily giggled.

Justice grabbed a plate. They all sat either around the kitchen table or at the high counter. They chatted and talked about what had occurred last night with Gabe. The story made Thomas emotional and happy. They talked about what to do about the Sawyer house and that it seemed totally infested with dark forces. As they talked, Iris silently climbed down from her booster chair and went to Justice.

Lizzy stood up to take her. "No, Iris, sweetie, you don't want to get Justice sick, do you?"

Iris sniffed.

Justice smiled. “It’s okay, Mrs. Tanner. I never get sick.” He lifted Iris onto his lap. “We’re not gonna let a silly old cold stop us, are we, Iris?” he asked.

Iris shook her head. “No,” she said softly and then sneezed, making everyone laugh. Everyone except Iris. She laid her head against Justice’s chest. “I want Gabe,” she said softly.

Justice smiled. “I do too. I’ve never met him, but I imagine he’s a force to be reckoned with.”

“He’s that,” Keegan said proudly, as he pulled out his phone to check the notice. He nodded at Heather. “Nolan’s here.”

A few moments later, Nolan came in the front door and headed straight to the kitchen. “Hey everyone. Sorry I’m late, but the contractor showed up early at the house and had some questions.”

Nolan headed straight to Heather, kissed her quickly, then turned to everyone. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” the Tanners all said.

Nolan nodded at Justice. “Morning, Cuz,” he said jovially.

Justice smiled and stood. “Granddad, this is the one I was telling you about. This is Nolan Sawyer, who, according to AI, is your fifth cousin twice removed. That is if I have all the ‘greats’ counted right.”

Nolan smiled and shook hands with the man. “Ahh, Mr. Sawyer, I am so excited to meet you.”

Thomas rose and smiled. “This is amazing. God works in our lives in so many amazing ways. I am also excited to meet you and to get to know you, and hopefully, your father and brothers, and grandparents too.”

Nolan nodded. “Well, sir, Heather and I are getting married this summer, and if you’ll come to the wedding, you’ll get to meet them all.”

Thomas grinned. “Wow, meeting relatives and being invited to a wedding all in the same minute. This IS a special day.”

“Yeah, if only they’d set a date,” Rose quipped.

“We have,” Heather said. “We were gonna tell you all today.”

They all quieted.

Heather smiled. “Saturday evening, July 12th.”

They all cheered.

“Do you know where you want to have the wedding?” Lizzy asked.

“Yes ma’am,” Heather said. “We’re hoping to have our new barn raised and ready by then.”

“Uh, there’s no hoping,” Rose said quickly. “That means we HAVE to make it happen, so, make the plans and get to work.”

The sisters all giggled. Rose, was about to get into business mode.

Nolan grabbed some breakfast and the meal came to an end. It wasn’t long thereafter that the group stood silently on Main Street of Pine Forest, looking up at the old brick home.

Lily sighed as she looked up at what was once the home of Justice’s ancestors. The

place was not very wide, but it was surprisingly long. It extended to the far back part of the property. On the main floor when you first walk in, there is a large room. She didn't know how the floor plan used to be, but from when the home was a general store and from when it was a library, the front room was the main customer area. Straight back from the front door you came to a staircase on the left, a bathroom on the left just past the staircase and on the right a giant kitchen. Past the kitchen was a large storage area and finally a back door that led to a quaint backyard that the town of Pine Forest had always kept neat and trimmed. That would be Lily's job from now on.

Justice reach out and took her hand. "You ready to go in?"

She nodded.

It was Thomas who spoke next. "I'm not sure what we'll discover as we go into this old place. I have a feeling, a knowing, that this place is somewhat dangerous. So, before we enter, would you all join me in prayer?"

Those present all nodded. Keegan, Justice, Nolan, Heather, Rose, Violet, Daisy and Lily and Thomas all took hands.

"Keegan," Thomas said. "I feel like God would you like you, one of His strong warriors, to pray for us."

Keegan was surprised by the words. The girls were touched and immediately became emotional.

Keegan bowed his head. He prayed for the armor of God. He prayed for them to be able to have discernment and strength in facing whatever is on the other side of those brick walls. He prayed for victory and strength and for the Holy Spirit to fill each of them and protect them. As he prayed, all nerves went away. Justice and Thomas headed up the short set of steps to the front door. Justice showed Thomas how the door sticks and how to get it open. He had to shove on it pretty hard and the door swung open with a giant whoosh.

It seemed a strong wind came out of the house. It blew the girls' hair back and almost knocked Violet over. Daisy gave a slight shriek. Thomas frowned and Keegan shook his head. "Wait. Let me go first," he suddenly said.

Thomas and Justice obliged and stepped back to allow Keegan to pass. He walked into the house with much authority, he stood there a minute and then nodded. "Okay. You can come in."

They all entered and stood in the front room. The light fixture that had fallen was still there in the middle of the room. Lily stepped forward. "I have a broom in the kitchen. I'll get it. She moved through into the kitchen and screamed.

Justice was by her side in seconds. When he saw nothing, he asked, "What is it? What happened?"

Lily giggled. "Sorry. It was a mouse. It ran right in front of me."

Justice chuckled. Keegan, who stood right behind Justice, holstered his weapon. She laughed and then grabbed a broom and dustpan. "Will you grab that box right there?" she asked.

He nodded, took cleaners out of a small cardboard box and followed her back into the main room. He smiled at the others. "She saw a mouse," he explained.

"We heard," Rose said. "I hate those things."

Thomas contemplated as he circled slowly around the room. He could imagine Knox Sawyer coming home in the evenings into this room. He could see him kiss Birdie and scoop up his children and kiss them. He could see the parties he described in the journals. He could see the elaborate Christmas decorations. That made Thomas frown. The man refused to believe in God, but he celebrated the kind of Christmas that many celebrate. All the trimmings, the decorations and gifts and elaborate meals, but no mention of the true gift, the Son of God born in the flesh. That is what Knox was bemoaning at the end of his life in the later journals. He was coming to the realization that God was indeed real, and living without Him in your life, can destroy. We need His strength and His goodness and His protection and His blessing.

"So, Lily," Daisy asked. "How were you thinking about changing this up?"

They all turned to listen.

"Well, this large main room would of course be the dining room. I would change those two front windows into a single large picture window." She turned toward the fireplace. "And I'd enlarge those windows there on either side of the fireplace and bring lots of light into the room. There is plenty of room for, I'm thinking, twelve to fourteen small round tables, or less if I use rectangular tables."

Rose nodded. "That sounds doable."

"And if you wanted more room for more customers," Keegan began. "You can change the windows on either side of the fireplace to doors and put a covered, screened-in deck out there so that people can sit outside if they'd like and watch people walk by."

"Oh, I love that idea," Nolan said.

Justice nodded. "Me too. And then, when there is live music, people walking by will be drawn to come in and check it out."

Lily nodded. She hadn't really spoken to her sisters about possibly performing live for people. "Yes, that would be awesome," she said softly. "And I was thinking, I want a small stage, and the only place it could go is here," she said pointing to the wall between the kitchen and the main room. "So, I'd like to actually move the kitchen back more, toward the back of the house. There's plenty of room back there to make the shift. Behind the kitchen there's a large storage room, and then another room behind it. Don't know what they used to be."

"They were bedrooms," Justice said. "The large storage room was Knox and Birdie's bedroom. The smaller one was the nursery."

Lily nodded solemnly. "It hurts to think then, that the nursery was where the baby was, the first one who died of yellow fever."

They all nodded.

"Remember," Thomas said. "We are not here to commiserate and feel sad. We are here to bring joy and love and light to this place."

Rose smiled. "Right. And then, is there a bathroom on this level?"

Lily nodded. "Yes, it's there on the other side of the staircase, but it needs big time renovation and we need to divide it into two for men and women."

"Ooh, that will be fun to renovate the restrooms," Heather said. "I saw this

magazine that had just the most adorable designs for modern restrooms that still had the old timey flair."

"Can you find that article again?" Lily asked.

"Yes, because it's on my phone."

"Let's look around upstairs," Nolan suggested.

They all filed up the stairs which was designed with seven stairs and then a landing and then seven more stairs. Upstairs there was four bedrooms and one small very old bathroom.

"This would have to be completely redone," Lily said. "Maybe change it into two bedrooms with their own bathroom or even have a small kitchen up here and I could rent out the upper floor as an apartment."

"Or even live here yourself," Heather said.

Lily glanced at Justice to see his reaction. His face was blank. She had no idea what he was thinking. Was he considering a longer relationship with her than just a few months of renovating the house? Would Justice possibly want to live here, in his ancestral home, while they were renovating? If so, she could get the upstairs done first. She wondered what he was thinking. On the other hand, would she want to live here once 'Lily's Place' became a thing? Would she want to move out of her parents' home? That didn't seem very appealing. She loved the home her parents provided for her. She loved her little sisters and brother and wanted to be around them as much as possible. She glanced at Justice again. This guy made her want to be near him, though it was waaay too early in their relationship to even consider if it will last a long time. She sighed. It was hard to plan for her future when she didn't know what her future would be.

The group meandered through the second floor, making suggestions or throwing out ideas. There was a short second stairway that led to the attic. They headed up to see what was there, but it was pretty much dust and a few old shelving units. One by one, they headed back down. Justice and Lily were the last.

He smiled at her. "Finally, we're alone."

She gave a soft laugh. "Why do you want to be alone?"

He pulled her close. "So I can do this." He kissed her, lingering, tasting.

She sighed. "That was nice."

"It was."

"What?" she asked.

"I said, 'it was.' Why? What did you think I said?"

She frowned. "Something very crude."

He shook his head. "I don't speak crudely. Well, almost never." He grinned. "What did you think I said?"

"I can't repeat it," Lily said. "It was not nice, but it was something about what you were gonna do to me."

He frowned. "Maybe we'd better head out."

Lily nodded and moved to the small set of steps. She gasped and then yelped as she flew off the top step and fell to the next floor.

"Lily!" Justice yelled. He jumped down the five steps. "Lily, are you okay?"

She sat up, rubbing her hip. "I think so."

Keegan and the others rushed back up to the second floor.

"What happened?" Keegan asked.

She shook her head. "It felt like someone pushed me down the steps."

All eyes turned to Justice. "Well, it wasn't me," he said quickly.

Thomas sighed. "There are dark forces here. They are strong."

"Well, let's do what we had planned to do. Go downstairs, kneel in a circle, read the Bible, and rebuke this darkness," Rose said.

"Let's get to it," Keegan said.

It was as if they'd done this together many times, Justice thought. They knelt together. They each took a turn praying. Each prayer was so beautiful and heartfelt. Each word uttered seemed filled with the Holy Spirit.

Keegan read from Mark 9:25, "When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.""

Nolan read from Luke, "Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you."

Heather read in Psalm, "Who will rise up for me against the evildoers? or who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity?"

Thomas Sawyer read from several different books of the Bible and ended with, 1 Peter 5:8-9, where it says, "Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. Stand firm against him, and be strong in your faith."

Each took their turn. Then something miraculous happened. Miraculous in Justice's eyes and heart anyway. Rather than reading a scripture, Lily suddenly began to sing a beautiful song version of *The Lord's Prayer*. Her voice was sweet and clear and beautiful and Justice could barely breathe. Her sisters joined in with her and it seemed like there were angels joining in. He blinked because it seemed there was light rising from around them, swirling around them.

When they finished, there was complete silence. No one moved. No one spoke. It was a full minute before Justice cleared his throat. "Well, I think that is the most beautiful thing I have ever heard."

Keegan nodded. "Girls, that was beautiful."

"It was," Nolan said.

Thomas had to wipe tears from his eyes. "Thank you, Jesus, that we were able to witness such beauty and love and righteousness and light right here in this place. Thank you, Father. We ask for strength and wisdom to fight the battle that is coming. We ask you to fill this home with your light and let it become a place where people can come to be filled with your Spirit, in Jesus' Holy and Mighty and Powerful name, amen."

"Amen," they all repeated.

✝✝✝

January 18th 7:15 AM PST Saturday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky, Bree, young Eric, Jordan, Jamie, Josie, Amari, Brittney, and Taylor gathered in the kitchen for breakfast after their morning workout. The young ones sat at the kitchen table. Taylor, Jordan and young Eric sat along the breakfast bar.

Ricky glanced at his phone and nodded at young Eric to go open the front door. Ricky then looked around at the group. "Attention everyone."

They all quieted.

Ricky nodded. "So, something went down last night," he began. "Something at the *Ameritech Training Center*."

Taylor's eyes opened wide. "What? What happened?"

Ricky went on to tell the whole story. Even though he began with the fact that Gabe was okay, still, by the time he finished, Taylor was in tears.

"So, where is he now, Daddy? Surely they're not gonna make him do his training this morning, right?"

Ricky shrugged. "Well, he's not hurt that badly. Just scratched up a bit is what I heard."

She sniffed. "Daddy, I need to talk to him. I need to see him."

She felt hands at her waist and someone lean toward her.

"What do you need to say to me," Gabe whispered in her ear.

She gasped and turned around and jumped into his arms. "Gabe! Oh, Gabe, are you okay?" She didn't give him time to answer, but just kissed him and hugged him and kissed him again. She put her hands on both sides of his face. "Oh, Gabe, look at you. You have cuts and scratches all over your face. It looks terrible. Does it hurt?"

He laughed. "Considering what could have happened, I'm okay, baby. Really. I'm good. I'm just hungry."

She laughed and hugged him again. "You're hungry. Of course you are. I'm so happy you're here. I missed you so much. I'm so glad you're okay. Oh, thank you, Jesus. Thank you so much."

He set her feet back down on the floor and she took his hand. "Come sit and I'll get you an enormous plate of food."

He didn't argue. "Thank you so much, Tay. I'm hungry and I'm so tired. I've been up all night and I just want to eat and rest."

Ricky laughed softly. "Well, after you eat and before you rest, you'll have to withstand an examination with the doc."

"You mean, Miss Jeffy?"

Ricky nodded.

Gabe smiled. "Her I don't mind at all." He looked at everyone else standing around. "So, hey everyone. Did y'all already have breakfast?"

"No, we're about to join you," young Eric said.

"You go ahead and bless the food," Ricky said.

They all quickly bowed their heads as young Eric prayed.

"Father, good morning. We want to thank you for the food we're about to partake

and for my mom who prepared it, bless it that it may nourish and strengthen and heal us, um especially young Gabe here. Thank you Jesus so much that you spoke to Gabe, woke him, and you saved the lives of Agent Booth and Commander Edwards and Gabe. Thank you. We are so very grateful. You have indeed blessed us in so many ways and we want you to know that we realize that and we are forever grateful. We love you. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

"Amen," was spoken firmly by the others.

They all grabbed plates and served themselves, except for Gabe whom was made to sit while Taylor served him some breakfast.

"So, Gabe, fill us in on what happened last night," young Eric said.

Gabe thought a moment and was surprised to feel emotions well up. He'd killed before. He expected to feel the weight of it back last August, but didn't and actually spoke to his father about that, worried that he felt pretty numb about it. His father explained that Gabe just hadn't processed it yet, that he'd taken lives, and it would eventually hit him. He guessed it had finally hit him, because suddenly, he felt sick inside that he'd had to take another life. His eyes moistened and his throat clogged. "Um, well," he began and then shook his head. "So, like, would you mind if we don't talk about it right now?"

Young Eric nodded. He too had taken lives, and he completely understood. "Don't mind a bit. We'll talk later."

Gabe nodded and offered a slight smile. He looked over the group. "So, what? Did you guys have a big sleep-over last night?"

Jordan giggled. "I guess we did. We stayed here because Mom needed to get up really early and get over to the restaurant, because today is her big day. We're gonna eat breakfast and head over to help her."

Gabe smiled. "So, today is her big opening?"

It was Ricky who answered. "Yes. Last Tuesday was a soft opening, but today is the big grand opening. Bree and I are going, and young Eric and Jordan and the kids. It's a big day for Jewell and we wanna make sure it's a giant success."

Gabe nodded. "Maybe I can get a little rest and join you guys a little later in the day."

"Maybe," Bree said. "But you've been up the entire night, right?"

"Yes ma'am. It took the cops a long time to process the scene and then because someone died, ya know, like, I had to answer a whole lot of questions. Commander Edwards vouched for me of course, but he was hurt more than me and they transported him to the hospital. I'm thinking they didn't really buy that I'd had a dream. They were suspicious about how I knew about the bomb, but the guys on my team told the story. Anyway, when they finally let me go, I came straight here. So, I'm a little tired. But I can rest a few hours and then come help."

"Well, Gabe, Jeffy is on her way over to examine you, and she'll let you know if you should come over to help."

He nodded. "Yes ma'am. Okay."

"Wow. No argument?"

Gabe sighed. “Too tired to argue.”

Ricky nodded. “And that should tell you something. Okay, young man, eat, and go up to your room and sleep and we’ll wait to hear from Jeffy.”

“I’m gonna stay here with Gabe,” Taylor said. She expected push back from her parents but they only smiled at her and nodded.

“Take care of him,” Bree said.

Taylor smiled in surprise and relief. “I will.” She smiled at Jordan. “Please explain it to your mom.”

“I will. No worries, Tay.”

“Don’t worry, Taylor,” Ricky said. “Miss Jewell has plenty of help and is about to be a huge hit.”

Taylor smiled. “I have no doubt.”

✝✝✝

While the family left for the opening of the *Tasters’ Table*, Taylor accompanied Gabe upstairs, helped him get comfortable and then headed back down to clean up the breakfast dishes. Jeffy arrived a few minutes later, accompanied by her little Elijah and an Ameritech agent, since her husband Cam was currently busy working undercover.

“Hi Aunt Jeffy,” Taylor said as they came in.

“Good morning, Taylor,” Jeffy said sweetly, then spoke to the bundle in her arms. “Hey little man, you wanna go see your cousin, huh?”

Taylor grinned and held out her arms. “Of course he does, don’t ya, Eli? And I know a secret. I’m your favorite cousin, aren’t I?” She took the baby and began kissing his fat little cheeks.

Jeffy smiled. “Gabe’s upstairs?”

“Yes ma’am,” Taylor answered. “You want me to come up with you?”

“Nope. He needs some privacy.”

“Oh, okay. So, is he in more danger than I’m being told?”

“I’m here to assess that. It was a high-order explosive, so there was a blast wave, which is what causes most injuries. The bomb was powerful enough to knock down the back wall of the gatehouse, but the wall itself offered protection to Gabe. Commander Edwards took a bigger hit because he was in front of Gabe. He’s been assessed in the hospital and he has some burns from the blast wind and some fragment wounds, but it appears he’s gonna be okay. Which probably means Gabe will be too. I just want to examine him to be sure. They wanted him to go to the hospital, but he was adamant that he wasn’t going, so, I came to him.”

“Thank you, Aunt Jeffy.”

She smiled. “No need to thank me. It’s one of my callings in life.”

Taylor nodded. Her Aunt said that Jesus told her to take care of Gabe, so she wasn’t just saying that lightly. It was a true calling.

“Hey Agent Brown,” Taylor said at the man standing behind her Aunt. Would you like some breakfast?”

“No thank you, Taylor. I’ve eaten.”

“Well, make yourself at home,” Taylor said sweetly.

Jeffy headed upstairs and knocked on Gabe's door. When he didn't answer, she opened the door and peeked in. He was sound asleep.

She moved forward and placed her hand on his head and closed her eyes. Gabe startled and came awake.

"It's just me," Jeffy said.

Gabe rolled over and sat up.

Jeffy looked at his face. It had a significant number of scratches and cuts on it and on his neck. She shook her head. "You should've gone to the hospital."

He sighed. "I'm sorry, Dr. Kino. The thought of going there and then wondering when they'll let me come home, I just couldn't. I needed to come home. I needed to see Taylor."

Jeffy smiled. "Well, since you saved two lives, I'm gonna give you a pass."

Gabe smiled. "Thank you."

"I'm gonna need you to get out from under the covers and take your shirt off."

He did as ordered.

She shook her head again. The right side of his chest and right shoulder had several small bruises, obviously from fragmentation. His legs appeared uninjured. "Don't move or speak," she said as she ran her hands over his chest and abdomen.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"What's wrong?" Gabe asked.

"Shhh." After a few minutes she nodded and then reached up and smoothed some hair back from his forehead in a loving gesture. "You had no choice," she finally said.

Gabe blinked up at her.

She smiled. "Those are not my words. They are God's words. He knows the heart of Kenneth Burke, the man you had to kill and what happens to him is now between God and Kenneth. You did what you had to do. You are a warrior. You saved lives. There is no guilt." Jeffy nodded. "I think that's the whole message."

Gabe sniffed and nodded.

Jeffy placed her hand on the side of Gabe's head and closed her eyes and prayed and finally pulled her hand away. "Is the ringing in your ear gone now?"

Gabe nodded. "Oh! Uh, yes ma'am. I didn't even realize it had been ringing until you just stopped it, but that is a relief now that it's gone. Thank you."

She shook her head. "It wasn't me. It was Jesus."

Gabe's eyes filled. "I don't get it, Dr. Kino. Why would Jesus pay so much special attention to me?"

Jeffy smiled. "He says, He woke you and sent you to help and you were obedient and went without a thought for your own safety. The least He could do is make sure you're healthy and strong."

Gabe sniffed and shook his head. "Jesus is so awesome."

Jeffy nodded. "He is indeed." She smiled. "You can put your shirt back on. Get some sleep. Dad is hoping to speak with you sometime today, but right now he's doing something pretty important."

Gabe smiled. "Well, everything he does is pretty important. So, what's he got goin'

today?"

"Today he is meeting Alo and Dani Quinn at the airport and bringing them to the house. They're gonna be visiting at least a week."

"The Quinns? That's Raylynn's and Kaylee's parents?"

"Yep, and they are one of the twelve."

Gabe nodded. "Well, that's pretty cool. I hope I get to meet them."

"I'm sure you will. For now, rest, okay?"

"Yes ma'am."

Jeffy giggled. "Calling me 'ma'am.' That's so cute."

Gabe grinned, and turned on his side. Jeffy pulled the covers up under his chin. "Nighty night, Gabriel Tanner."

"Night."

Jeffy left the room. She went down and made up two intense giant smoothies and put them in the refrigerator with instructions to make sure Gabe drinks one when he wakes up. She then gathered Elijah from Taylor, and left the house. Taylor immediately finished up cleaning the kitchen and then headed to where she desperately wanted to be. With Gabe.

She peeked into the room. He was asleep. She closed the door and tiptoed to the bed. Peering down at his battered face, her heart broke at the sight. She could imagine the pieces of brick and metal and wood spraying out and battering him.

Suddenly, he lifted the covers, then opened his eyes and smiled. "Come snuggle with me," he said softly.

Smiling, she kicked off her shoes, laid her phone on the table and climbed in beside him, turning to face him.

He looked into her eyes. "Hey."

"Hey," she whispered.

"Are we alone in the house?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He immediately learned forward and kissed her and didn't stop until she moaned. When he pulled away he was breathing hard. He was thinking about things he shouldn't be thinking about. Sighing, it dawned on him that he must be experiencing that thing, that primal post-war reaction syndrome thing.

"Don't stop," Taylor begged softly.

He drew a deep breath and smiled. "I have to. Turn over and face the door."

She did as ordered. He pulled her back against him, and hugged her tight. "There now. Go to sleep."

Closing her eyes, Taylor obeyed. It was so easy to relax when she was snuggled up close to him.

It was two hours later when she was awakened by her phone. She grabbed it up. "Hello."

"Hi honey," Bree said. "How's Gabe?"

"He's sleeping. Aunt Jeffy said he was good but he needed to rest."

"Yes, she told me the same thing. So, he's still sleeping?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, Commander Edwards is on his way there to speak to him. So, wake Gabe up because he probably wants to dress or at least splash some water on his face. From what I'm told, Commander Edwards is limping and moving a little slow, so don't make him go upstairs to Gabe."

"Yes ma'am. I'll take care of it. So, how's the grand opening going?"

"Well, the doors open in about fifteen minutes so we'll let you know. There are people lined up to come in, and media, and it's pretty exciting."

"Is Miss Jewell a nervous wreck?"

Bree laughed. "Well, she's holding it together, but yeah, she's nervous. I'm just so proud of her. She's being strong. She's so talented. I'm really happy to see her bloom like this."

"Me too," Taylor said. "She's a really nice lady and she's had such a hard life. Jordan told me lots of stories. We are so blessed, Mom. I'm so blessed. I love that Dad is good to you and is always there for you, and I don't have to worry about him hurting you."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Tay, because at one point, this past year, I thought you were becoming a man-hater."

Taylor sighed. "Hmm, I might have said some pretty dumb stuff about men being toxic or not having any feelings. I didn't really mean it. I was just being a kid. I'm really sorry about that, Mom."

"No worries, sweet girl. You are forgiven. Now, go wake Gabe, because Sam will be there pretty soon."

"Who's Sam?"

"Oh, sorry, I mean Commander Edwards."

"Okay, I'll wake Gabe. Take lots of pics!"

"I have and I will continue."

"Okay, bye Mom. Love you."

"Love you, Taylor."

Taylor hit 'end', stood up and pushed her phone into her hip pocket then turned and peered closely at Gabe. She pulled the covers off him and his eyes blinked open.

He smiled at her. "What time is it?" he asked.

"It's almost eleven."

"Hmm, so I've been sleeping a few hours."

"Do you feel better?"

He sighed and shook his head. "No, I feel like I could sleep forever, and I'm achy and sore."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you can't sleep forever because Commander Edwards is on the way over to speak to you and I've been told to wake you up and have you dress and meet him downstairs because he's limping."

Gabe sat up. "Well okay then."

"Maybe you can sleep some more after he leaves," Taylor offered.

"Maybe. We'll see," Gabe said. "It's probably best that I just go ahead and get up

and maybe go to bed early tonight."

Taylor nodded. "Do you want to take a shower, or just wash up, or what? What can I get for you?"

Gabe shook his head. "Nothing. Thanks for taking care of me. I'm gonna jump in the shower and put on some clean clothes. I'll be down soon."

"Okay. See you downstairs."

He watched her leave and then rose from the bed. Twenty minutes later he was dressed in some blue jeans, a soft gray UGA sweat-shirt and some athletic shoes. When he'd come out of the bathroom he was surprised and pleased to see that the bed was made. That was an act of kindness because he was pretty stiff and sore. He grabbed up his phone and headed down.

Taylor was just headed up the stairs. "Oh, there you are. I was just coming to get you. Commander Edwards is coming up the drive right now."

"Good timing," Gabe said with a smile. He went straight to the door, opened it, stepped out on the porch and watched him pull up. An agent was driving. Gabe smiled and hurried down to open the back passenger door, then stood back and stood at attention.

The Commander stood up and gave a slight bow to Gabe, who reverently bowed to the Commander.

"Sir," Gabe said. "It's nice to see you."

"You as well, Agent Tanner," the man said formally and then smiled.

He held out his hand and Gabe shook it, but then was surprised when the Commander pulled him in for a hug.

"Thank you, Gabe, for your faithfulness. You saved my life."

Gabe's face turned red. "Oh, well, no need for thanks. Not to me, anyway. But I sure am thankful to God for waking me up and helping me to save you, because attending your funeral, or Agent Booth's funeral, that is not what I had planned for this weekend."

The Commander smiled. "Well, I'm glad we didn't ruin your weekend plans. Shall we go in?"

"Oh, uh, yes sir, sorry sir. I wasn't thinking."

"That's okay. You might be a little foggy for a few days."

Gabe nodded. They turned and headed inside.

Taylor was there smiling. She held out her hand. "Commander Edwards, it's nice to see you again."

Sam smiled. "You as well, Miss Kino. So tell me, do you actually remember meeting me before?"

"Oh, yes sir. It was a few years ago at the big fundraiser for the *Canyon Ridge Bay Church of Christ*."

"Wow, very good young lady. You are as sharp as the rest of your family."

"Thank you, that's a nice compliment. Please come in. I have a message from my Aunt Jeffy for you and Gabe both to drink the smoothies she left in the refrigerator, so, I'll go get it for you. She says it will help with the inflammation."

"Thank you. I am a little sore and moving a little slow."

Gabe nodded. "Me too. Dr. Kino says you blocked a lot of the fragments and took the brunt of the blast. So please come in and sit in the den where it's comfortable and we'll take our medicine."

He led the Commander to the den and had him sit in one of the big recliners, then he sat down on the edge of the sofa.

The Commander leaned back and nodded. "Well then, this is actually a very comfortable chair."

Gabe nodded. "It seems whenever anyone gets hurt, they come to this room and sit there. I sat there a lot after this past August when I almost died. Young Eric sat there after he'd been kidnapped. His fiancé Jordan, she sat there when the serial rapist dude beat her up real bad."

Taylor smiled. "Mom calls it the healing chair," she said as she handed each of them a large thermal cup.

"Then I guess I'm in the right place."

There was a lull in the conversation as they sipped the smoothie. Gabe sat quietly. He'd learned to do that from his father.

"So," Samuel Edwards began. "I wanted to come by and thank you personally Gabe, for your faithfulness and your effort on my behalf."

"You already thanked me, sir. That's good enough. I was just doing what anyone else would do."

Sam shook his head. "Well, that's not true, but we'll move along. I also wanted to check on your welfare in person, and I see that you're gonna be okay."

Gabe nodded. "Yes sir. I'll be fine. I promise, I won't let this little thing interfere with my training."

Sam smiled. "I have no doubt. Gabe, I also thought you deserve to know what Kenneth Burke was talking about."

Gabe blinked, because his heart beat harder and his eyes filled the moment the man's name was mentioned.

Sam nodded. "Are you having trouble with what happened?"

Gabe swallowed. "Maybe a little bit."

"It's not your first time though."

"No sir. It's not. But it's the first time I like —felt it." Gabe's emotions welled up and he glanced at Taylor.

She got the message and immediately rose. "It sounds like this is some man talk stuff that would be better if I didn't hear it, so I'll excuse myself. Just yell at me if you need anything."

Gabe nodded and watched her go. It seemed his sweet Taylor was growing up. He sighed. "Commander, when I killed those two men back when Taylor had been taken, I didn't feel much of anything. I expected to feel really bad about it and I didn't. I thought maybe I was some weird psychopath with no emotions, but my father said it was just because I hadn't processed it yet. Well, I think I'm beginning to process it, because this time, as soon as I pulled the trigger, I felt so bad, so much remorse and so sorry that

I took the life of a man who I'm guessing was once your friend."

As Gabe spoke, he blinked and the tears ran down his face. He immediately scrubbed his hands over his face.

Sam nodded. "He *was* once my friend and partner, but Gabe, you did the right thing, young man, because he was about to kill me and then you. You get that, right? We were dead. We were sitting ducks. It was him or us and I'm pretty grateful for your quick decision."

Gabe swallowed and nodded. "But what I was thinking was, maybe if I'd showed him that I had a gun, maybe if I said, like, 'wait, put the gun down and I won't shoot,' like, maybe if I'd given him the chance to put his gun down, maybe he wouldn't be dead."

Sam shook his head. "Tell me Gabe, why you didn't pull the gun out earlier."

Gabe thought. "Well, I tried, but you were on top of me and I couldn't get my hand out. I had the gun in my hand but I couldn't get my hand out of the waist of my pants. That's why I was pushing on you. I didn't mean to hurt you. I remember you grunted when I pushed on your side."

"I grunted because I could feel the gun at my back and I was trying to lift my body up so you could get it out. You only pulled the gun out in the split second Ken was about to shoot me in the head. You didn't have time to warn him. You did what you had to do."

Gabe sat there contemplating that. Finally, he breathed and looked up at the man. "Thank you for that, sir. It helps." He sighed. "So, he was your partner?"

"Yes. We were both vice cops for the LAPD. We'd been partners for years. I was the best man at his wedding and he was the best man at my wedding. Everything was okay for a few years. I mean, more than okay. It was great. There were backyard barbecues. Promotions. It was like something out of a movie. But then, Jillian, that's his wife's name, she got pregnant. Ken began to feel the burden of the expenses that comes along with kids. She had two boys within four years and then she got pregnant again with a girl but there were complications. She lost the baby girl and medical bills began to pile up. I offered to help out, but he wasn't having it.

"I began to see or suspect little things. Like, money from busts disappearing. Like, his attitude changing. He was drinking a lot. He was letting little things go, like turning a blind eye to illegal dealings, accepting lies being told to us by perps. Blatant lies. I finally realized he was not just taking money. He was taking drugs and selling them back to the bad guys. He was my friend. I tried to talk some sense into him. Out of loyalty to a friend who was struggling, I tried to ignore what he was doing and kept urging him to stop. But then, in one of his drug deals, he killed a kid. It was an accident, but it should never have happened.

"The kid was the baby sister of one of the teenage peddlers. She came out of a room, startled him and he shot her. She was only four years old. Ken then arrested her brother for the murder of the little girl and for pushin' drugs. I wasn't there, but he told me what he'd done. He felt bad about it, but not bad enough to fix it. I couldn't let that kid go to jail for murdering his own sister. I went to Ken and told him to make it right.

I told him to tell the truth. I told him I'd get him help. But he was in too deep and couldn't do it. So, I narced on him. I tried to do it in a way where it would do the less harm. But again, he was in too deep.

"The kid still did time for selling and possession. Ken went to prison for three years for criminal negligent homicide. The LAPD would not take him back of course and he had a hard time finding work, but finally went to work for UPS. I was receiving a lot of flack for narcing on one of our own and ended up leaving the force. I knew Jason Lee from some of the sting operations we'd been involved in, and he took me in immediately. I've been here ever since."

Gabe sighed. "I'm glad Mr. Lee took you in. I'm glad you're here. But that is a really sad story, Commander."

"Life comes down to choices, Gabe. When things get tough, do you look for the easy way out, or do you stand strong?"

Gabe nodded. "How do you think his wife is doing with all this?"

"Well now, Gabe, that's a good question. Ken said she left him, so I'm not sure that she even knows what's happened."

"Are you thinking about reaching out to her?" Gabe asked.

Sam's eyes opened wide. "I guess I need to, huh?"

Gabe nodded. "I'm not sure, sir, but I think you could not only help her, but maybe get some closure for yourself."

Sam nodded. "Are you sure you're only eighteen? Because I have to say, you, Gabe Tanner, are a bright light."

Gabe rolled his eyes and shrugged. "I was just wondering about Mr. Burke's boys. Are they good or do they need some direction? Has Mrs. Burke remarried? Maybe you could find out and my foundation could do something to help them."

"That is a fine idea, Gabe. I will definitely look into it."

Gabe sighed. "So, one more thing. Right before Ken was gonna shoot you, you said your wife is finally pregnant?"

Sam nodded. "Yes. I don't usually share my personal life with my trainees, but you heard what I said so that makes you an exception. Yes, my wife, Ashley, we are expecting a baby girl in May. We're older now. I'm forty two. She's thirty-five and we're very happy and excited."

Gabe smiled. "That's great, sir. I'm happy for you."

"You have a bunch of sisters, don't ya?"

"Yes sir. I have seven sisters and one brother and every single one of them are unique and amazing. And you just reminded me, I'm supposed to Facetime my little sister today because she has a cold and she's missing me."

Sam smiled. "Well then, why don't you go ahead and call her. I'd love to meet her. How old is she?"

"She's three." He took out his phone and made the call.

"Hey Gabe," Lizzy said sweetly when she answered her phone.

"Hey Mom. I'm here with Commander Edwards and I just remembered you asked me to call Iris, so, is she around?"

"Yes, she's in the den. Let me walk in there. Iiiriiis, guess who wants to talk to you?"

Gabe heard a big sniff.

"Gabe," she said.

But it concerned him, because she didn't sound excited like her usual self. "Hi there my little flower," he said.

"Hi Gabe," Iris said in her little munchkin voice. "I got a cold."

"I heard. Do you feel yucky?"

"Yeah, I feel vewy yucky. And I keep sneezing. And my nose is wed and sore. And I fwowed up."

"Oh, sweet girl, I'm so sorry that you feel so bad."

"Me too."

He chuckled. "Iris, I want you to meet one of my bosses. Iris this is Commander Edwards."

She made a face. "Hewo Manda Edward," she repeated.

"Hi Iris," Sam said. "That's a hard name, huh? You can just call me Sam. That's my real name."

"I gotta fwiend named Sam. He goes to da center."

"Oh wow, that is cool."

"But you are older."

"Yep, I'm an old man."

"Gabe why you got cuts on yo face?" Iris said.

"Oh, well, there was this big explosion at work but I'm okay."

"Gabe, I want you to come home now."

"I can't right now, sweetie, but I'll come home to see you in a few months."

She wrinkled up her nose and then sneezed.

"Bless you," Gabe said. "Iris, you know it's against my very important rules for you to get sick."

"I know, but I can't hep it."

"Well, I want you to get well really soon, okay?"

"Okay." She sniffed loudly and rubbed her sleeve over her nose.

"Mom, is she okay?"

Lizzy turned the phone to herself. "It's a stubborn cold, but she's okay I think. She's had it for almost a week now. If she's not better by Monday I might take her into the doctor."

Gabe nodded. "She seems pretty miserable."

"I know. She's just pitiful, aren't you my sweet girl," Lizzy purred.

"Well, I'd better let you get some sleep, Iris," Gabe said.

"Okay," she said meekly and that concerned Gabe even more. "Iris, close your eyes a minute."

He watched her do as he said. "Father God, Iris is not feeling too good right now and so we ask you to heal her and help her to get better really fast, if you are willing, in Jesus' name we pray, amen."

"Amen," both Lizzy and Iris said together.

"Where's Dad?" Gabe asked.

"He and the girls and Nolan and Justice and his grandfather, Thomas, went over to see Lily's house."

Gabe nodded. "Cool. So, does Mr. Sawyer seem like a cool guy?"

"Yes. He is very much like Grandmaster Kino."

"That's what I was hoping to hear you say. Anyway, we'll talk about that later. I just wanted to talk to Iris before I got too busy. I'll let you go."

"Okay, sweetie. Iris say 'bye' to Gabe."

"Bye, Gabe," she said softly.

"Bye little flower. I love you."

"Wove you too, Gabe. Come home."

"Soon, baby girl. Bye bye."

He ended the call and smiled at the Commander. "Thanks for your patience. I didn't want it to get too late before I called her."

"You two are very close, aren't you?"

"Yes sir. For a long time, I was the only biological child of my father. Then Iris came along, and I didn't know I could love a little baby as much as I love her. She has my heart. And now, there are two more, Isaiah and Gentian. They're twins born right before Thanksgiving. They're like almost two months old now."

"It's unusual for a young man to appreciate little ones like that."

Gabe shrugged. "I'm a family kinda guy. Family is where it's at."

Sam nodded.

Gabe looked the man over. "So, Commander, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"When you swam at the pool the other day. I noticed you had scars on your chest and leg. Did that happen with Ameritech or while you were a cop?"

Sam absently ran his hand over his chest. "Neither one. I was in the Army, stationed in Somalia for humanitarian relief. We were in a village providing food and medical supplies when we were ambushed. I was wounded. Shot in the chest and leg. I was lucky to get outta there. My good friend standing next to me, didn't make it."

"I'm sorry, sir and thank you for your service. How old were you when that happened?"

"I was nineteen years old."

"Wow. So young."

Sam nodded. "You too, are young for what you've been through. Just because you didn't leave the country, doesn't make what happened to you any less."

"Yeah, but I wasn't *serving* my country. I was nothing but a newbie, untrained Ameritech Agent."

"Well, Gabe, I consider working at Ameritech the same as serving my country in the military. Maybe more so, in some ways, because of Ameritech's righteousness. So don't play down your service."

Gabe nodded as he considered that idea. "That sounds good, sir."

The Commander set his recliner upright and stood. “Well, Agent Tanner, I’m tired and want to go home to my beautiful pregnant wife and get some sleep. I will see you Sunday evening.”

Gabe stood. “Yes sir. I’ll be there.” He smiled. “With time to spare. Thank you, sir, for coming by and explaining things to me.”

“It seemed the least I could do. Thank you, for saving my life.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

Sam chuckled. “Ya know, this won’t get you special points or privileges with me, I mean, not in your training.”

Gabe’s eyes opened wide. “Oh, no sir. I would never think that and that wasn’t why I did it. I was serving the Lord, sir. I expect nothing else than to look forward to my next assignment.”

“Do you mean your next assignment from me, or from the Lord?”

Gabe smiled. “Yes sir.”

✝✝✝

Psalm 91:7-11

“A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you say, “The Lord is my refuge,” and you make the Most High your dwelling no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;”

Chapter Fifteen

January 18th Saturday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric Kino smiled at the two people who currently graced his home. Alo and Dani Quinn. He already loved them. They were quiet and humble, intelligent, and filled with God's light. Eric glanced over at the Quinn's adopted daughters, Raylynn, the eldest, who was sitting next to Eric's grandson, JoJo, and Kaylee, the youngest. She was a wild spirit, a strong spirit and had temporarily lost her way, but was now back on the right path and coming into her own.

Also present in the room was the rest of JoJo's family. Mark and Bella, little Emily, Logan and his girlfriend, Melody, and last but not least, Ryder Bell, a young homeless teen they'd taken in off the streets just before Christmas. Eric's eyes shifted to his wife and their five little ones, who were currently sitting on the floor with Emily, being very quiet and very well-behaved. Shelley smiled at him. He sighed with pleasure. His heart was full.

"Thank you so much for that delicious lunch," Dani Quinn said.

"You are so welcome," Shelley replied. "I admit, I was nervous about cooking for you, but Bella is a gem in the kitchen and she helps me a lot, so, it was really her who did most of the cooking."

"Why were you nervous about cooking for us?" Dani asked.

"Well, I'm not known for being a great cook," Shelley said. She shrugged. "I try, and I've gotten much better than I used to be, but it's a struggle."

"She does fine," Bella added. "The only thing she lacks is confidence."

Dani smiled. "It looks like you have a wonderful relationship with your daughter-in-law."

"I do," Shelley said. "She's a gem and so is my other daughter-in-law who happens to be Bella's sister."

Dani smiled. "Aww! Your sons married sisters? That is special."

Shelley nodded. "It is wonderful and I love those two young ladies as if they were my own daughters."

"I can sense you have a huge heart, Shelley."

"That she does," Eric said. He looked up as Jeffy came down the stairs and entered the room.

Jeffy smiled. "Well, Elijah is finally sound asleep for his nap, Cam called to check in and let me know he's good and is gathering lots of information and witnesses to the bad cops' doings, he has some offers of loyalty and things are going well and happening quickly. And that means I'm free to come down here and join you guys. Sorry the baby made such a fuss at lunch."

"No need to apologize. Babies are wonderful," Alo said.

As if on cue, little Angelina Kino rose from the floor where she'd been looking at a book. She carried the book and came to stand in front of Alo Quinn. She smiled her adorable smile. "Is you Ray and KayKay's daddy?"

Alo smiled and nodded. "Yes I am," he said.

"Is you my Daddy's brother?"

He chuckled. "In some ways I am."

"Can I sit on your lap?"

"Angel," Shelley began, but Eric caught her eye and shook his head.

Alo smiled. "Of course you can." He lifted her up onto his lap where he sat in his wheelchair.

Angelina smiled and leaned back against his chest. She didn't move. She didn't fidget. She sat quietly and calmly.

Jeffy smiled. "She's drawn to you, Mr. Quinn. She can see your light."

Alo smiled and ran his hand over the child's long, silky curls.

"So, beautiful Quinn family," Eric began. "We have much to talk about. Raylynn told us your story, about when you were ten, Alo. It was a beautiful story. Were you able to read the book I sent you?"

"Oh yes. Dani and I have read your story several times now. You are a remarkable man, Eric. We are in awe of you."

Eric frowned. "You and I are the same."

Alo shook his head. "No. We're not the same. Last night before I went to sleep, Jesus spoke to me. He told me when I come here, to listen to you, to defer to you, you are the leader of twelve. I'm not quite sure what that means, but that's what He said. I'm sure of it."

Eric's eyes moistened. "I do know what that means. What 'the twelve' means. And it is what I was getting ready to speak to you about."

Alo nodded. "Good. Jesus told me that you set the example. You were the strongest. You made it happen. You were the most humble. You were the hardest worker. He said He was so proud of you and that I will soon work with you to bring many others relief and love and comfort."

Eric nodded. "Well now, that is a beautiful message, Alo. Thank you for that, though I'm not sure about the strongest or the most anything."

Alo chuckled. "And Jesus told me that He sent the message through me because you would not hear it otherwise."

The others in the room laughed softly.

Mark squeezed Bella's hand because just last night they'd talked about how blessed they were to have Eric in their lives.

JoJo glanced at Logan and they smiled. They'd always felt such a strength and power coming from their grandfather and they were glad that Jesus Himself was giving him a pat on the back. It was the "well done," he'd said many times he hoped he'd get one day.

"So, Eric," Alo said. "Tell me about the 'leader of twelve'."

Eric nodded. “As I told you on the phone last week, we found Reverend Clark and he too has a similar story. You’ll get to meet him tomorrow at church. So, that is you and myself and Reverend Clark, who at the age of ten, went missing for three days, almost died, and were visited by and taught by an angel. Each story is a little different. I was in an underground cave. Reverend Clark was on top of Mt. Shasta, you were in a bubble by a creek, unable to walk. I have just learned of two more. A man, Aboriginal man, down in Australia, named Ces Iman. He was lost near *Glasshouse Mountain* which is in eastern Australia, and a man in Kansas named Thomas Sawyer, who was sucked up into a tornado with his baby sister. He is the CEO of *Pure Foods*. So, that is five so far. And now, we’ve been given confirmations that there are twelve of us. So that means we will eventually find seven more somewhere.”

“Amazing,” Dani said. “I wonder what the Lord has planned for you.”

Eric nodded. “I wonder the same thing. Last year, just a few months ago actually, I was out walking on the beach and wondered if there were others like me, others who’d actually seen an angel as a kid and it changed their life direction. Only a few months later, we found Reverend Clark. And now, here’s three more. It is amazing and exciting.”

Alo frowned as he thought. “You know, my girls set me up with a computer and internet and I received a message to accept the gifts.”

Eric nodded.

“I know that you facilitated all of that,” Alo said. “Thank you, again.”

Eric waved it away.

“I’m bringing it up because I started a little YouTube channel and I’ve been speaking online, looking for people who might need to be ministered to. In one video, I told my story. I decided it was time to stop being fearful and put myself out there. Well, just a few days ago I received an email from a man all the way up in Norway. He said he wanted to share with me a similar story, a story like mine. I told him I was going out of town and would get back with him in a few weeks. I wonder if, I mean, do you think he might be another one?”

Eric smiled. “He might be. Do you have his information where you might be able to reach out to him?”

“Oh, well, I didn’t bring my computer with me.”

“You don’t need your computer, Dad,” Kaylee said quickly. “You have a cell phone. Do you know your YouTube login?”

He grinned. “Oh, yes. I have the YouTube app all set up on my phone. I used my computer to find out how to do that, and now I use it to make videos.”

Kaylee nodded. “Awesome, Dad. And you have email on your phone too, so you can go to your email, get his information and reach out to him.”

Eric smiled. “Wonderful. Let’s reach out to him sometime today.”

Alo smiled. “This is exciting.”

“It really is,” Shelley said. “I wish we could find them all and get them all together. But Norway and Australia is a long way to come.”

Eric nodded. “It is, but we can make that happen easy enough. Let’s see first if we

can find them all. We still have seven, or maybe only six more that we need to find."

Jeffy closed her eyes. "You will find them, though there is a problem with one." She sighed. "But that problem has a solution. There will be twelve. There will be twelve." She opened her eyes. "I just received that information and also, something else." She turned and smiled at Alo. "Mr. Quinn, I have a personal question for you and please just tell me to mind my own business if it's too personal, or we can talk another time privately if you'd like, but, what do the doctors say about your legs? What do they say is your condition?"

Alo nodded. "It's not too personal, but I don't have a straight answer. At first they thought it was caused by Guillain-Barré Syndrome because I did have the flu before I lost the use of my legs. But then another doctor said I had a stroke, though an MRI does not show that. They've also tossed out words like Multiple Sclerosis, ALS and even Polio."

Jeffy frowned. "Can you move them at all?"

He nodded. "Sometimes. I have to concentrate very hard and I might get them to shift an inch maybe at most."

She nodded. "Can you try for me?"

He smiled. "Sure. I'll try."

"Angelina, come here sweetie," Eric said softly.

She immediately jumped down off Alo's lap and ran to her father.

Alo drew a deep breath, pulled the blanket off his legs and stared down at them, concentrating very hard.

Everyone was quiet as Alo Quinn tried to will his legs to move. After a full minute, he shook his head. "I'm sorry. Maybe I'm too tired."

Jeffy smiled. "It's okay. Traveling day is always tiring. So, just one more question. May I read you?"

"Read me?"

She nodded. "I've been given a gift. Sometimes, well, most times, I can read your body and diagnose."

"Well, how can I turn down that offer from a Nobel prize winning doctor? What do I need to do?"

She stood and smiled and shook her head. "Not a thing. I'm just gonna hug you. I'll circle behind you and put my arms around you for a minute. I might lean my head next to yours. It's better for me if you don't move."

Again, no one spoke as Jeffy did her thing.

She sighed and sniffed and finally pulled away. Her eyes met her father's. "Well, everyone, I want to tell you what I was shown, but before I do, Jesus has just directed me to do something. Men? Dad, Mark, JoJo, Logan, and Ryder, I need you to circle around and find a place to lay your hands on Mr. Quinn."

They rose to do her bidding. Jeffy nodded. "Ladies, Mom, Bella, Mel, Ray and Kay, I need you to circle around the men and lay your hands on their shoulders." She nodded. "Mrs. Quinn will you please come stand over here next to me, right behind him, and then wrap your arm around him to rest right here on his chest. Yes like that. Good."

Jeffy joined Mrs. Quinn, and began to pray. “Father, we are grateful for this man, Alo Quinn. He is a precious child of God, a precious servant of Yours and he is ready to do Your will in all things. I saw what You showed me, and the message you gave me for Mr. Quinn is that it is time to go out of that window. The window becomes a door and it is time for you to walk through it. Dad, speak. It is your time to speak.”

Eric Kino drew a deep breath. “In the name of the Father, the Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, Alo Quinn, rise and— walk.”

Everyone standing around the circle gasped.

Jeffy moved away and nodded at the others. “Step back, everyone.”

Eric locked eyes with Alo. He smiled and nodded. Alo’s eyes filled with tears. He moved his legs off the footrests. Dani Quinn’s mouth fell open. Alo pushed his hands against the armrests and stood on his feet. Eric nodded again, encouraging him. “No fear,” Eric said.

Alo took a step.

“Dear Lord Jesus,” Raylynn whispered.

He took another. Eric backed up and held his hands out to catch him if he fell. He took another and another and followed Eric all the way across the large room. Most everyone was wiping tears from their faces.

“Go back to your chair,” Eric said softly.

Alo turned slowly and headed back to his chair. He turned again and slowly lowered himself back into the wheelchair.

Shelley glanced down at the children. They were silently watching, their little faces glowing.

Dani threw her arms around her husband. “Alo, what is going on?”

Raylynn and Kaylee both approached and hugged their father.

Jeffy smiled and sighed with pleasure. “When I read him, Jesus showed me the problems. He told me that He would connect the nerve endings that had been severed. He told me what had severed them— was fear. Fear is powerful, but the fear in Alo Quinn is now defeated. First, he reached out the window. Then, he came all the way to California. Soon, he will travel to many places. He is free.”

“This is a flat out miracle,” Kaylee said.

“Did you plan this ahead of time?” Raylynn asked.

Jeffy shook her head. “No, why?”

“How did Grandmaster Kino know what to say?”

Jeffy sighed. “Dad?”

Eric shrugged. “The words came into my head very clearly. I was almost reluctant to say them. I mean, what if I said it and it didn’t happen? But Jesus told me to trust Him, so, I had to show Him that I trust Him and I said the words.”

“Well, thank you, Jesus,” Shelley said quickly.

Everyone murmured an amen.

“Mr. Quinn?” Jeffy asked. “How do you feel?”

He cleared his throat. “I’m a little overwhelmed. I’m full of gratitude.” He smiled. “And I want to do it again to make sure it wasn’t just a fluke.”

The group chuckled.

"Do it again," Jeffy said. "You'll see. But then, rest, because the muscles need time to get used to walking again."

"Well, if God just healed him," Ryder asked, "can't He just make the muscles strong again too?"

Eric smiled. "He could, yes, but there has to be some effort from Mr. Quinn. That's the way it works. If God did everything for us, we would never get strong."

Ryder nodded in understanding.

"What an amazing afternoon," Bella said softly. "I feel so blessed that I was able to witness this."

"Me too," Raylynn said. "I'm so grateful."

JoJo put his arm around her. "Me too."

Raylynn smiled up at the guy who'd come into her life and changed it so completely. It looked like it might be an amazing year. She turned to him. "If you hadn't saved Kaylee, I would've never met you. But you did, and I did meet you, and you introduced me to your family, and Dr. Kino sent us home for Christmas, and we found my father was one of the twelve, and now, he can walk. It is crazy. It is overwhelming."

"God's plans are intricate and amazing," JoJo said.

"They are," Logan said. "And when we see things come together like this, it's such a testimony. Such a blessing that we could witness this."

Melody took his hand and squeezed it. "I can't wait to tell my family."

"Well, I too am overwhelmed," Mark said. "But I just remembered that we are expected to go to Jewell's opening for dinner in a few hours. Are you all still planning on going?"

They all nodded.

Ryder's phone rang and he glanced at the caller ID and frowned. "Uh, sorry, I have to take this," he said as he hurried away.

"Well," Eric said. "Why don't we all get some rest. My kids have to go down for a nap. Let's be ready to leave here about 5:00. How does that sound?"

"Sounds wonderful," Dani said.

Alo stood again. "I'd like to try to walk to the bedroom."

Dani nodded. "I'll follow along behind you with the wheelchair, just in case." She turned to the others in the room. "I don't feel like we can just leave this meeting and just walk to our room. I mean, that's the point. We can. But would it be okay if could have a prayer of thanks first?"

Eric nodded. "Well said, Dani. Alo? Would you like to pray?"

He smiled. "Oh I would indeed."

Everyone bowed their heads as Alo took a few minutes to pour out his gratitude for the amazing gift of healing. Then, the group watched as Alo and Dani headed toward the hall that led past Eric's study to the one bedroom on the ground floor that had once been the housekeeper's room.

Jeffy smiled. "Thank you, Jesus," she whispered.

✝✝✝

Ryder stepped outside onto the Kino's large deck his phone to his ear. "Hey Naomi, is everything okay?"

She sniffed. "No, Ryder, everything is not okay. Listen, could you come and get the girls for me?"

"Get the girls? What do you mean?"

"I mean just come and pick them up and take care of them, like, babysit for the night."

Ryder sighed. "I mean, yes, I can do that. But why? What's goin' on?"

"Your father is drinking and he's mad. He just left to go get more beer. I know him, Ryder. I know he's gonna get violent and I'm afraid for the girls. I don't want him to hurt them and I don't them to see him hurt me."

"Well of course I'll come, but what's he so mad about?"

"Some guy is saying Aaron messed up his car. He said the oil all drained out because Aaron failed to tighten the drain plug properly. He says he's gonna sue. Ryder, please come."

"Okay, I'm coming right now, but I'm farther away right now. I'm over at the Kinos. It will take me at least twenty minutes to get there."

"Oh. Okay, listen, then I'm gonna take the girls over to Mae's house. Do you remember Mae?"

"Yeah, she lives two doors down across the street, right?"

"Yes. Please go there and pick them up."

"Okay I will. But Naomi, did the agent who installed the cameras, did he give you his card?"

"Yes."

"Call him."

"I'm afraid to. He'll come and Aaron will pull a gun on him."

"What? Since when did my dad get a gun?"

"He bragged that he stole it out of some guy's car. It was under the seat and Aaron took it. Ryder I don't have time to talk to you right now. I have to get the kids over to Mae."

Ryder nodded his head. "Okay. I'm on my way."

He ended the call and hurried inside.

"Everything okay?" JoJo asked.

Ryder shook his head. "I need to leave. I have to go pick up my sisters."

JoJo glanced over at his father who was on the phone. "So, there's trouble brewing at your father's house?"

Ryder nodded. "Yes. Guess it's a good thing I brought my car."

JoJo frowned. "Maybe, but I'm thinkin' I'm gonna go with you. Tell me what's happening."

Ryder nodded. "You can come if you want, but I have to go right now. I'll tell you what's goin' on while I drive."

JoJo nodded. "Ray, I have to leave for a bit. You okay with that?"

"Sure. Anything I can do to help?"

"Yes. Tell my dad when he gets off the phone that I went with Ryder to pick up his sisters."

"Got it."

JoJo and Ryder took off.

✝✝✝

Naomi Bell made it back to the house after delivering the girls to the neighbor and headed into the bedroom. Grabbing a gym bag, she stuffed some clothes and underwear into it and then looked in her purse to make sure she had her wallet and then stuffed the entire purse into the bag, zipped it closed, took it out and put it in the backseat of her car. Patting her front pocket to make sure she had her keys, and her back pocket to make sure she had her phone, she glanced over at Mae's house. Ryder wasn't there yet. Hopefully he would be soon. She headed back inside and went to the kitchen to make something for Aaron to eat, hoping he might calm down with some food in his stomach.

She heard the car drive up and was both relieved and disappointed. "Relieved that he drove and didn't have an accident and kill someone. Disappointed that he didn't get pulled over and arrested for DUI. Bracing for the moment he came in the door, she gripped the counter.

The front door slammed open so hard, the door knob made a hole in the sheetrock behind the door.

Aaron Bell let go a sling of ugly curses. Then screamed at his wife. "Naomi, get your ugly, self-righteous face in here."

Her eyes welled with tears. Not because he called her ugly, but because of fear. She poked her head out of the small kitchen. "Aaron, I'm in here making you something to eat."

He stormed toward her. "Did I tell you to make me something to eat?" Grabbing her by her upper arms, he shook her. "Huh?" he yelled.

She shook her head. "No. I just thought you might like some dinner."

"What I'd like is to bash your face in. Where are those ugly brats of yours, huh? Why are they so quiet?"

Her eyes opened wide. She hadn't thought he would actually ask her where the kids were. He usually didn't want anything to do with them and he never asked for them. She swallowed hard. "Um, they had a play date with a friend from the nursery," she lied.

He shook her hard. "So, you think you can just let my children go off to who knows where?"

Naomi whimpered.

He shook her again and then started dragging her toward the bedroom.

She did all she knew to do. She kneed him. He fell to the floor groaning. Trying to run to the door she tripped over him and scrambled to her feet. He was on his feet too quickly though and grabbed her by the hair and jerked her back away from the door, turned her around and struck her across the face.

Naomi hit the floor face first. Moaning, she rolled over and started to sit up, but he stomped on her stomach with his large, greasy boot and she curled up in a ball. His next intention was to kneel across her and beat her to a bloody pulp, but he didn't get the

chance. A man, dressed in black, had him in a headlock and jerked him off of Naomi. Another man slammed him face down on the floor and he was cuffed as he screamed obscenities.

Next thing Aaron knew, a police officer was reading him his rights.

✝✝✝

Ryder was driving like a bat out of hell. He slowed when he turned the corner and drove cautiously past his father's house. There were police cars and flashing lights and an ambulance.

JoJo looked the scene over. "Looks like we're too late," JoJo said.

Ryder pulled his car into Mae's driveway. He and JoJo got out of the car and Ryder immediately started across the street.

"Wait for me," JoJo said and hurried after him.

They were stopped at the sidewalk that led to the front door.

"Sorry, but you can't go in."

Ryder looked at the police officer. JoJo looked past him to a man in black with an eagle insignia on the breast pocket of his jacket. "Agent?"

The man turned. "Yes?"

"I'm JoJo Adams. Chief Adams is my uncle."

"Yes, JoJo, I recognize you." He held out his hand. "I'm Agent Hunt."

"It's nice to meet you Agent Hunt. Soo, this is my friend, actually, my foster brother, and this is his parent's home."

"What's your name, son?"

"Ryder Bell, sir. Is Naomi okay? She's my step-mother. She called me. Did he hurt her?"

The agent sighed and nodded. "Yeah, she's been hurt, but she's alive and she will be okay."

"How badly is she hurt?"

"Not sure. They asked me to step outside for her privacy. Your father slapped her around and stomped on her abdomen and she's um, bleeding. She says she may have been pregnant."

Ryder drew a sharp breath and shook his head, looked down and then looked back up quickly. "Where's my father?"

"He's been arrested and is currently sitting inside that police vehicle," he said, pointing to a squad car.

Ryder started toward the car, but both the agent and JoJo grabbed him.

"Hold on there, son," Agent Hunt said quickly.

"I just want to see him. I just want to show him that I'm still alive. Show him that he didn't defeat me. Please. I won't even open the door. Let me just see him through the window. Please. I need this."

JoJo let go and stood back and looked over at Agent Hunt. "Sir, I promise I won't let him open the door."

The agent nodded, let go of Ryder and watched him and JoJo approach the car, his body tense and ready just in case.

Ryder looked around to make sure no cops were gonna stop him. The few he saw were busy, one talking on the phone, another writing something on a clip board. Ryder neared the car, bent slightly and stared into the back window. The man inside turned his head slowly and looked at him. Ryder waited to see the recognition in his eyes. His eyes opened wider. Ryder smiled and nodded his head. "You see me, don't ya?" he said softly at first. "You see me," he said louder. "Yeah, it's me, Dad. It's me. You didn't defeat me. You see that? You didn't defeat me. I'm stronger now, Dad, and you can't hurt me anymore. And I won't let you hurt Naomi anymore. You got it? Do you see?" he yelled and hit the window with his fist. "YOU CAN'T HIT ME ANYMORE," he screamed.

The cops rushed toward him, but JoJo pulled Ryder away first.

Ryder tried to pull away from him and lunge at the window again, but the cops grabbed him. Agent Hunt was there though.

"I've got him," Agent Hunt said quietly and the cops released him.

JoJo put his hands on either side of Ryder's face and got him to calm down and look him in the eyes. "You're right, Ryder. He can't hurt you anymore. He can't as long as you don't lower yourself to his level. Rise up, brother. Rise up, rise above, let go and forgive."

Ryder looked JoJo deep in the eyes, his chest heaving with his breaths. Finally, he began to calm and he nodded his head. His eyes filled and spilled over. JoJo wrapped his arms around Ryder's shoulders and hugged him hard. Ryder sobbed on JoJo's shoulder.

When he got himself together, he raised his head, sniffed, wiped away his tears and drew a deep breath.

JoJo smiled at him. "You got this?"

Ryder nodded. "I got it. Thanks, JoJo."

"I got you, brother."

"So, Ryder, they're bringing Mrs. Bell out," Agent Hunt said. "Would you like to speak to her?"

Ryder nodded. "Yes, please."

"Follow me."

They followed Agent Hunt to the stretcher where they were about to lift her up into the ambulance. Agent Hunt stopped the paramedic. "Mrs. Bell, your step-son is here."

Naomi nodded. "Ryder?"

"I'm here," he said as he stepped closer. He took her outstretched hand.

"Did you get the girls?" she asked.

"No, but I'm about to. Are you okay?"

"I think so. Are you the one who called the police?"

He shook his head.

"It was Ameritech," Agent Hunt said from behind. "You know we were monitoring your situation, right? And when things went south we moved in. We don't just watch and hope he doesn't kill you."

Ryder nodded. "I didn't know how you worked exactly. Naomi said she didn't want

to call you because she was afraid that my dad would shoot you. I should've known, though that you guys would do the right thing and step in."

Agent Hunt nodded. "Yeah, we try to always do the right thing. And we're not afraid of someone pulling a gun. Because we're stronger, faster and very skilled. So, don't ever be afraid to call us." He smiled. "We'll be in touch with you, Mrs. Bell. For now, you just heal."

She nodded.

"I'll bring the girls to see you tomorrow," Ryder said.

She sniffed. "Thank you."

"Um, Naomi, can I call your sister for you?"

She nodded and smiled. "My purse is in my gym bag in the car. My keys are on the floor in the house. My phone too. Her number is in the phone. Callie's birthday is the code. Yes, please call my sister. Thank you, Ryder. Oh, and tell Mae thanks for taking the girls."

He squeezed her hand, offered a reassuring smile, and the paramedics lifted her up into the back of the ambulance.

Once they pulled away Ryder turned to the Agent. "So, is there anything I need to do for you or tell you about?"

"Not at this time. Chief Davis will be in touch with you and we'll talk about all the charges we intend to press. For now, go get your sisters."

JoJo put his hand on Ryder's shoulder. "Yeah, let's go get the girls."

They shook Agent Hunt's hand and headed back across the street.

Ryder knocked on the door and Mae answered. "Ryder?"

"Yes ma'am."

"You've grown up."

He nodded with a slight smile. "Yes ma'am."

She motioned across the street. "Well, that was quite a spectacle."

"Unfortunately. Thank you for taking care of Callie and Ellie."

"No problem. Come in."

Ryder glanced over his shoulder at JoJo. "Um, Mae, this is my good friend, JoJo Adams."

JoJo nodded and smiled. "Hello."

She nodded. "JoJo Adams, why does that sound familiar?"

"Um, well, he was the USC quarterback for the past three years, and a Heisman candidate."

"JoJo Adams?" asked a deep voice from inside.

Mae turned around to see her husband smiling and approaching the door. "You know him?"

"Not personally, sweetheart, but everyone knows JoJo Adams." He offered his hand to JoJo. "Name's Bill."

JoJo smiled and shook his hand. "Hello, sir."

"Come in, come in," he said jovially.

Frowning, JoJo nodded at Ryder to go on in and he followed him.

"So, Ryder," Bill began. "Uh, nice to see you again. I told Mae I thought you were long gone."

Ryder nodded. "No sir, I stuck around. I've been pretty worried about my sisters and Naomi."

"With good reason," Mae put in quickly.

"Yes ma'am. So, um, Naomi wanted me to tell you thanks so much for looking after the girls. Unfortunately, I am in a bit of a time crunch."

"Oh! Well, you're welcome. They're back in the den watching a movie. I didn't want them to see what was going on across the street."

Ryder nodded. "Thank you."

"So, Ryder, how do you know JoJo?" Bill asked.

Ryder shifted uncomfortably.

JoJo jumped in. "We ran into each other just before Christmas at a charity event, and got to talkin', and I found out he was thinking about changing locations and I invited him to spend Christmas with our family. Now, he's like one of the family. We were having lunch with my grandparents when Mrs. Bell called and asked Ryder to come get the girls and I decided to come along for the ride. But we promised my grandparents we'd be right back because we're going to a big restaurant opening for a good friend of my aunt and uncle."

"Your aunt and uncle? You wouldn't happen to be talking about Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams?"

"Yes sir, and I don't want to keep them waiting."

"Oh, I didn't realize the connection," Mae said suddenly. "Oh my, Ryder, what great connections you've made."

"Actually, our family thinks me meeting Ryder is a great connection," JoJo said with a smile.

Ryder rolled his eyes. JoJo was such a player and always seemed to know the right things to say. He had a quick mind.

"Ryder, why don't you go on back and get the girls," Mae said.

He nodded. "Okay, um, so, Mae, like, it's been a while since I've seen them. I'm not sure if they'll remember me, so I might need your help to convince them to come with me."

She nodded. "Well, let's go see."

JoJo stayed in the small living room chatting football with Bill.

Ryder peeked into the den and four-year-old Ellie looked up at him. Her eyes opened wide. "Ryder!"

He smiled and knelt down and opened his arms. She scrambled off the sofa and ran to him.

He hugged her to his chest, his eyes filling. It was a relief to know she remembered him. "Hi Ellie-belly," he said softly. "I sure did miss you."

"I missed you too, Ryder," she said, her little voice choking with emotion. She laid her head on his shoulder.

"Oh, sweetie," he murmured as he hugged her and patted her back. "There now.

I'm here."

While this was going on, little two-year-old Callie was working her way down off the sofa too. Smiling she toddled over to him and he quickly set Ellie down and smiled at her. "Well, hello there, Callie. Do you remember me?" he asked softly.

She didn't answer but reached her hands up for him to pick her up, which he did immediately.

Mae smiled. "Well, Ryder, it looks like they remember you."

"I don't know how Callie could. She was only one when I left."

"Maybe she remembers, like, the essence of you. Someone familiar."

He nodded and turned back to the girls, he cuddled Callie against his chest and nodded at Ellie. "So, how would you girls like to go for a ride with me? We're gonna go see some other children, a whole bunch of them, and we're gonna go to a restaurant and get something good to eat."

"I want to go," Ellie said.

He smiled. "Good. Let's get your coats and your things and I'll go get your car seats into the car."

JoJo chatted with Bill, while Ryder and Mae went to the house, found Naomi's keys and phone, locked up the house and retrieved the gym bag and car seats. Fifteen minutes later, the girls and Ryder and JoJo were driving along the PAC Coast Highway headed to the Kino estate.

Ryder glanced at JoJo. "So, does it bother you that people treat you differently because you're famous, or because your family is famous?"

JoJo shrugged. "I've learned to live with the situation. It can hinder sometimes. People are shallow and they are nice to me just because of mine, or my family's fame. But it can also help a situation too, so, I don't complain. I try very hard to teach through example, so I stay humble and try to help people understand that being famous doesn't make me better or more special than anyone else."

"Well, it kind of helped today, when you let them know we had famous people waiting on us."

JoJo chuckled. "Yeah, that was good. So, see, it helped the situation, but I only use the superpower for good."

Ryder smiled, because he actually thought of JoJo and his whole family as super heroes.

JoJo smiled. "It used to be a real issue, I mean, because of girls."

"Girls?"

"Yeah. I mean, until Raylynn, I never met a girl that didn't like me because of my family. Logan had the same problem."

"So, Raylynn didn't know who you were?"

"Actually, she did. But we met because of Kaylee when I saw her being beaten to death in a car in the school parking lot. I called Raylynn from the hospital to tell her about her sister being attacked and she thought I was playing a joke on her for Kaylee. She'd always been a fan of mine, apparently, and thought Kaylee was pranking her. She hung up on me."

Ryder chuckled.

"But I called her back and let her know that Kaylee was really hurt and it was no joke and she was totally humiliated and embarrassed and couldn't stop apologizing. When I met her, she knocked me off my feet. I mean, you've seen her. She's a knockout."

Ryder nodded. "For sure. Her and Kaylee both."

JoJo nodded. "Then I got to know her and she was so much more than beautiful. She was like, the sweetest, kindest, smartest, hardest working girl I've ever known. She'd been impressed by my football skills, yeah, and she loves football, but when I met her, my football career was over. I could tell she actually liked me for me. She was down to earth, and so sweet."

"You already said that," Ryder snarked.

JoJo grinned and shrugged. He turned and smiled at the two girls in the back seat. "Your sisters are really cute."

Ryder nodded. "I'm just glad they remembered me. Glad there wasn't a big scene of tears and fits being thrown."

"Me too. So, I forget, if you don't mind me asking, how old was your other sister the last time you saw her?"

Ryder frowned. "I was ten. Stephanie was two. So, that means she's eleven now. I bet she doesn't even know she has a brother."

"That's sad, Ryder. We gotta fix that."

"Maybe it's better to let sleeping dogs lie."

JoJo frowned. "In Ephesians 5:11 it says, 'Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.' and in John it says the truth will set you free. It seems to me that your sister might want to know the truth. I know I would want to know if I had an older brother or sister that my father didn't tell me about. My family believes that it's always better to know the truth, even if it's painful. It's a road that must be walked."

Ryder smiled. "Sometimes I forget how smart and insightful you are. And then I hear you preach and I remember."

JoJo smiled. "Well thank you, Ryder, for a great compliment. I think that's actually what I want to do."

"You wanna preach?"

"Yes, I really do. I mean, I'm already working as a stand-in youth minister. I love it. I love the kids. But the problem is, I need to find something to make enough money to support a wife and kids."

"Oh! Sooo, are you saying you're gonna marry Raylynn?"

JoJo smiled. "Well, I don't wanna jump the gun, but she makes me think about it. I mean, I've only known her a little over a month. But Lord have mercy I am in love with that girl."

"Have you told her?"

"No. Not yet. Like I said, it's too early, and I really need to get my own life into some kinda order."

"And if you hadn't gotten hurt, you'd be makin' millions playin' pro."

JoJo nodded. "Probably. But the money is not what's important."

"It is when you don't have any."

JoJo looked him over. "I get it. Though I'm blessed because I know that *I* won't end up homeless. And from now on, bro, neither will you. No matter what. We are your family now. My father is your father now. You have a safety net. We won't let you fall, as long as..."

Ryder glanced over at him. "As long as what? Go ahead and say what you were gonna say."

JoJo frowned. "Sorry. I shoulda stopped at 'we won't let you fall.' What I was gonna say after that, it's not really my place to say it."

"Whose place is it then?"

"It's Dad's place."

"Hmm, okay, but go ahead anyway and tell me what he would say."

JoJo sighed. "He would say as long as you walk a straight line."

"Oh, you mean like, no mistakes?"

"No. We all make mistakes. I think he'd be talkin' about willfully making a wrong choice. I mean like if you decide to rob a bank or something, then like, you're on your own."

Ryder chuckled. "Man, you're no fun."

JoJo smiled. "I know you're just joking around, but really, serving the Lord is lots of fun. It's fulfilling, it's rewarding, and it will give you true joy. Not the joy that comes from having a multi-million dollar football contract, but the joy of having God on your side. When you're doing His will for you, you cannot go wrong and He knows the things that will bring you true, real, unshakeable joy."

Ryder smiled.

"What?" JoJo asked.

"I now know why your teammates call you 'Preach.'"

JoJo laughed. "Yep. I can't help it. It just pops out of my mouth."

"Then you might be right, JoJo. I mean, that just might be your calling, or one of them anyway."

✝✝✝

Still January 18th 4:30 PM PST Saturday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ryder and JoJo arrived back at the Kino home. Ryder was worried about the girls feeling sad, or shy, or out of place, but it turned out much differently.

They came into the house and little Emily Adams was just coming downstairs. She was all dressed up for their trip to the new restaurant.

Ryder ushered Ellie inside and was carrying Callie. He was helping them take their coats off as Emily approached.

"Hello," Emily said sweetly to Ellie.

"Hi," Ellie replied softly.

"My name is Emily but everyone calls me Em. What's your name?"

Ellie smiled. “My name is Elina, but everyone calls me Ellie.”

Em smiled. “Ellie! That’s a pretty name. Is that your sister?” she asked, pointing at little Callie as Ryder set her down and took off her coat.

Ellie nodded. “Yes. Her name is Calina, but we call her Callie.”

Emily smiled at the young girl. “Hi, Callie.”

Callie looked down for just a minute and then back up with a smile.

“How old are you, Callie?” Em asked.

She held up two fingers.

“Oh! So is Angelina and her brothers.”

JoJo spoke softly to Ryder. “I just realized, so like, did you pack up some dressy stuff for the girls?”

Ryder sighed. “I grabbed everything I could, which wasn’t much, but I didn’t really see anything dressy.”

“Let me run upstairs and see if mom brought anything extra for Em.”

JoJo ran upstairs. “Hey Grandma,” he said as Shelley came out of the children’s room. “Hey kiddos,” he said to the five children behind her.

“Hi JoJo!” the children called.

“Where are you headed to so fast?” Shelley asked.

“I was gonna go ask Mom if she had an extra dress for Em that maybe Ryder’s sister, Ellie could use, and then I was gonna ask you if you had one for her little sister, Callie.”

“Oh! Well, I’m sure I do, but I doubt that your mom brought two dresses for Em. How old is Ellie?”

“She’s four and Callie is two.”

Shelley nodded. “Well, I’m sure we can find what we need in Angel’s closet.”

“Even for Ellie?”

“Yes, because when I see something I like, I buy it larger. Get Ryder to bring the girls up and we’ll get them all dressed.”

JoJo turned and headed back down and delivered the news and added, “I’m gonna go get cleaned up.”

“Boys,” Shelley said. “Go down to the den and please put away the crayons you used earlier.”

“Can we have a snack?” Manny asked.

“No sir, because we’re getting ready to go have some dinner.”

The boys headed down. They smiled and waved at the newcomers coming up the stairs with Ryder.

“Guys, these are my sisters,” Ryder said. “This is Callie and Ellie.”

“Hi,” Noah said quickly.

Ellie smiled.

The boys continued down and Ryder went upstairs with the girls. “Hey Miss Shelley.”

“Hello Ryder! And who do we have here?” She knelt down. “Look at these pretty girls! Hi! My name is Miss Shelley and this is Angelina. She’s two, just like you,”

Shelley said pointing at the younger girl.

Callie smiled.

"Well, your brother Ryder, and all of us are getting ready to go to a really nice restaurant to eat some really yummy food and we have to get all dressed up. And guess what? I have two really pretty dresses for you girls to put on to wear to the restaurant. Do you like pretty dresses?"

Ellie nodded. "I do. I have a pink dress."

"Oh my goodness you are kidding! Because the dress I have for you is pink! How awesome is that. Okay, so, you sweet girls come in here with me and we'll get you all fixed up."

Shelley stood and smiled at Ryder. "I'll take it from here, sweetie. You need to go get changed too."

Ryder smiled. "Yes ma'am. Thank you so much for your help."

"It's my pleasure but I'm sure you already know that."

Ryder chuckled. He really loved Miss Shelley. It made him wonder about his own grandmothers. He had three of them. His father's mother, his mother's mother and Naomi's mother and he actually didn't know any of them. He might have to check that out.

At the same time, in his study, Eric Kino and Alo Quinn sat together with great anticipation. While Alo had rested, Eric had sent an email to the contact from Norway who'd reached out to Alo. Eric checked to see if the man had answered a few minutes ago, and was surprised that there was indeed an answer, inviting them to call him. Eric had quickly knocked on the Quinn's door and told Alo, and they now sat in Eric's study as they waited for the man to answer his phone.

His name was Henrik Johansen, he was a videregående skole teacher, which is a high school teacher. In Norway, it was currently 1:30 in the morning, but the man had been awake, working on writing a book, and when he'd checked his email before retiring, he answered right away. He'd said he certainly would be unable to sleep due to his excitement on hearing from Alo, and finding that he was together with Eric Kino, whose book Henrik had just read a few weeks earlier. He asked them to call as soon as they see the email, no matter what time. They were now honoring his request.

"Hello!" Henrik said quickly and loudly.

Eric smiled. "Henrik, hello. This is Eric Kino and I have sitting here with me, Alo Quinn. You're on speaker so we can both hear you."

"Hello, hello, it's so exciting to hear from you," Henrik said.

"We feel the same way. I hope English is okay, as Norwegian is not one of my languages."

"Yes, English is fine. I am an English teacher."

"Oh, well that is wonderful," Eric said, smiling. "Henrik, we have so much we want to talk to you about, but Alo and I are in a bit of a time crunch. We only have about thirty minutes currently."

"I understand."

"So, Henrik, Alo said you reached out to him because you had a story similar to

his. Can you tell us, similar in what way?"

"Oh yes. I too was ten years old. I too was missing for three days. I too saw an angel who spoke to me about God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ. God is real. Jesus really was born, the only begotten Son of the Father, died on the cross for us, was resurrected and ascended into heaven. I too was told I had a mission, a mission to teach the world. And I have always wondered if there were more like me. When I heard the video Alo made, I had to reach out. The same day I reached out to him, I came upon your book online, Eric, and ordered it immediately. I am completely in awe, inspired and excited. So much so, that I am now writing my own book about my life experiences, which is why I was up so late tonight."

"I am completely delighted," Alo said.

"Who's speaking?" Henrik asked.

"Oh, that was Alo Quinn," Eric said. "Perhaps next time we should try to make this a video call."

"Yes, let's do! The two of you sound very much alike."

Eric smiled.

"Henrik, do you think you might have time," Alo began, "to give us a short version of your experience?"

"Hmm, short version... well, I went with a friend's family to go cross country snow skiing. While we were out, there was an avalanche. I was swept away. Thank goodness the others were safe. It seemed I was buried deep in the snow. I actually couldn't figure out which way was up or down. I was terrified and panicked and desperately trying to get out. I couldn't breath. And then I thought I felt someone digging me out, but it wasn't a person. It was a wolf. A beautiful, white wolf with large blue eyes. I think of him as an angel too." He chuckled.

"Well now, that is a beautiful thing," Alo said.

"It was indeed. He dug me out just enough so I could move and then ran away. I was still in a deep ditch though, and wasn't sure how to get up out of the ditch and in trying, I slipped and fell and slid down a very steep hill. The ice was sharp and I was all cut up. I remember marveling at how bright the blood was on the white snow.

"Then, as I tried to get to my feet, the bottom gave out from under me and I fell another twenty feet or so. I was in an ice cave and there was no way out. I knew I was gonna die there. I was so scared. I cried and cried. My mind went through all the things the both of you described. Fear, remorse and finally a letting go. And like you, only after I accepted my own death and looked forward to seeing God, which took me three days, only then did my angel appear to me.

He gave me water that warmed me and made me feel so good and energetic. He was so kind. He told me I had a mission. He instructed me to live nobly. To be exemplary in every single thing I did. To honor my parents. To take good care of my sisters and brother. I was the oldest of four. I was told that I will have the opportunity to teach people about God and therefore I must learn as much as possible, read the Bible, do study courses, but to also have discernment. I was told to take everything, every question, to God. Learn directly from Him. Bible scholars who act like they know

and understand it all, are like the Pharisees. Be very careful and do not be deceived. And I've done that. I prayed about you, Alo, and also about you, Eric, and Jesus was very pleased that I had found you. I was filled with the Holy Spirit when I asked about you, so, I reached out immediately."

"Well, we are so glad that you did," Eric said. "I have recently, over just the past few weeks, discovered that there are twelve of us. We only know of six thus far, but I have a feeling we will find the others soon."

"Twelve! Amazing. And you've found six! Wonderful. I want to know them all. And after you find twelve, then what?" Henrik asked.

Eric smiled. "Well, now that is the million dollar question, huh? God doesn't illuminate the whole path. He only shines a light on the one space in front of our feet. So, right now, the mission is simply to find the others."

"And how do you think we should do that?"

Eric nodded. "Well, I think prayer first. God will place the people in front of us. I don't want to advertise our search, because that may bring on a slew of false reports. Let's leave this at Jesus' feet and trust Him."

"I totally agree," both Alo and Henrik said at the same time.

"I am very excited to have a longer conversation with each of you," Henrik added. "This has made my day, my year even."

Eric chuckled. "Seeing as the year just began, it's a good start. Maybe we can keep it going."

"Eric, before we hang up, can you put me in touch with the other three that you already know of?"

"I can do that, but not before we hang up. Let me speak with them first to make sure it's okay to share their information. I would like to actually set up a video call with all of you. The time will probably be inconvenient for some of us because we have Norway, Australia, and four here in the US."

"Inconvenience does not matter to me," Henrik said.

"Me neither," Eric replied. "Probably the only one so far that might have trouble with it is Reverend Clark, and that is only because he's ninety-two years old and not as robust as the rest. So, Henrik, may I ask your age?"

"Yes. I'm seventy-two. And you?"

"I'm seventy and Alo here is eighty-three, but a very healthy eighty-three. Tom is seventy-eight and Ces is seventy-five."

"So far, Grandmaster Kino, you are the baby."

Eric chuckled.

✝✝✝

Isaiah 30:21

"And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left."

Chapter Sixteen

January 20th Monday Morning, California

The opening of Jewell Brooks' new restaurant had been a huge success. Of course, Ricky told her from the beginning that he'd invested in several restaurants including *Casa Latino*, the *Bayside Grill, Nature's Table* and *Two Sisters Diner*. He knew how to do it right. The reviews were raves. The clientele was very willing to pay. They'll just see how it goes. The only difference between the *Taster's Table* and the other restaurants was that Jewell was a single mom and she needed to be available for her children as much as possible, therefore they were working out either a limited schedule and/or training more chefs. For now, *The Taster's Table* was closed on Sundays and Mondays.

The thing was, Jewell just simply wanted to cook. She had absolutely no idea how to manage a restaurant. So, Ricky hired a manager whom she could trust and depend on. Now, Jewell is going to be able to support herself and her family with a decent income and her struggling days were over. Jewell was able to take her children to church yesterday, and now, today, Monday, Jewell would be regrouping, cleaning house, resting and spending some quality time with Josie and Jamie and Coco, Josie's dog.

Yesterday, on Sunday, instead of attending church, Ryder took his little sisters to see their mom at the hospital. They were pleasantly surprised to find out that she was being discharged. Ryder was sad to find out though, that Naomi had indeed been pregnant and had lost the baby. Because of that, Aaron Bell was charged with second-degree murder and would not be granted bail. Ryder took Naomi and the girls back to their home and his new foster family descended on them.

First, Bella and Breez Adams and Mickey Davis cleaned the small Bell home from top to bottom for them and then cooked everyone a delicious Sunday meal. Naomi was tucked in on the sofa and pampered and made to rest and recover. Jeff Davis and Joey Adams looked into home repairs that would be needed presently or in the near future. Zoe and Melody did laundry while Brook took care of baby Scarlett and Daniel and Jeremy Davis played with and occupied Callie and Ellie and Emily, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger. Mark looked into the financial status of the home and Aaron's car repair business and would be going after the home to be awarded to Naomi. The business may or may not be an asset depending on suits brought against it. Mark would have the firm look into what could be done.

Ryder and Logan walked around the outside of the property, cleaned up the yard and setting everything in place. It was a cathartic trip as Ryder told Logan stories of his childhood in the home. They were stories Logan himself was familiar with from his own childhood. Logan told Ryder a few of those stories and then told him that he was sure Ameritech could locate Ryder's mother and sister who'd been forced to leave when

Ryder had been only ten. Ryder thought he would discuss the possibilities of that with Mr. Adams very soon.

After everyone was fed, the dishes were done up and the women sat down with Naomi and made a grocery list and let her know they would be back on Monday morning with the groceries. Then, they went a step further. Naomi was relocated into the bedroom that she'd shared with her husband and as she pointed and directed, everyone worked to completely clean the room top to bottom, packing up her husband's things and making it a room that was clean and comfortable with no ugly memories. She didn't know that the women intended to come back with more than groceries. They would have new bedding, new bedspreads and curtains and a new dresser, because Aaron had smashed the mirror and broken a drawer in the old one. They would even have new clothing for the girls who had very little.

Finally before they took their leave, they bathed the girls and got them ready for bed and then the women and men gathered everyone together and they prayed over and blessed the home and Naomi and the girls.

JoJo wasn't there because after church, he went with Raylynn Quinn over to at the grand's house. It had been an absolutely beautiful church service, with Logan and the choir outdoing themselves, Patrick and JoJo both speaking and Ronny giving a highlight and prayer. Then JoJo, the Quinns, Ronny and his newfound family all went to the Kinos. Ronny's family included his daughter Linda, her grandchildren, Carson age fifteen and Sydney age eleven, and Patrick Barnes, Ronny's great nephew who'd decided to stay in Huntington Beach, while the rest of his family went back to Seattle after Christmas.

Patrick had decided to stay for a few reasons. One was, his Uncle Ronny needed someone to pastor his church and Patrick felt drawn to the calling. The other reason was a beautiful Filipino girl had caught his attention. At twenty-seven, Patrick was nine years older than the lovely Bristol Palma, but after speaking with her extensively in the course of putting together the church programs and having several dinners with her and her grandmother at his uncle's house, he determined the almost nineteen year old girl to be an old soul. Patrick put a contract on the vacant home next door to his Uncle Ronny, and asked Bristol out to dinner for next Friday. He felt like he could see his life unfolding in a beautiful way.

The point of the dinner at the Kinos was to get Eric Kino, Ronald Clark and Alo Quinn all together to discuss their ten-year-old boy adventures. The family, even the children, sat mesmerized as the men spoke of their thoughts and feelings when they'd spoken to an angel. There was a power emanating from them. Everyone could feel it.

It was Alo who suggested they try to have a joint call with Thomas and Henrik and Ces. It was close to 8:00 PM Sunday for them in Cali, which meant it was 2:00 PM on Monday in Australia, 5:00 AM on Monday in Norway, and 11:00 PM in Georgia. The other three men were only too happy to participate. The conversation that took place was one of power, and reverence and mutual respect. They all seemed to feel the same way that Alo felt, that though Eric was the youngest, he was the leader. Eric, the only one who had doubts about that, promised he would pray about it and not shirk his duties

if he was called upon to lead.

They all agreed that the rest of the twelve should be found organically and not in a publicized search. They chatted about their mutual experiences and vowed they would soon get together. Eric said he could facilitate that happening whenever any of them were ready and willing to travel. The others in the room were very quiet as they listened to what they thought might be history in the making. Unfortunately, not everyone was there. Mark, Joey and Jeff's families were busy "pulling an ox from a pit," so to speak, as they helped Naomi Bell and her daughters, and Ricky's family stayed home because Bree wasn't feeling well.

Jewell decided to cook dinner for Bree's family and so the younger Kino family and the Brooks spent Sunday evening together. That helped Bree, and Jamie was always happy to be in the presence of Ricky Kino. Josie was always happy to near young Eric. Jordan loved when she could be near her fiancé and with her own family too. And of course, Gabe was always grateful whenever he could be with Taylor and wherever she went, that's where he would be. Though, he admitted that he wanted desperately to be at Grandmaster Kino's home to hear what was being said and for that very reason, Jeffy made an almost two hour long video to capture the event.

Gabe had made it back to the dorms on Sunday evening with time to spare. As he drove back it reminded him of the same trip he'd taken just a week ago, though it seemed much longer. That made him look through his wallet for the card the older woman had handed him after he'd changed her tire. He'd meant to give her a call and make sure they were okay. He'd pulled into the parking lot at the Training Center and called immediately. He'd apologized for taking so long to call and asked if she'd been able to get the tire repaired. She assured him all was taken care of. He'd then asked how her husband was doing and if there was anything he could do for them, like any yard work or even any house repairs. She'd assured him all was well.

After the call he'd headed inside the dorm, and made it through inspection with only having to do one set of a hundred pushups because he'd forgotten to turn his phone to silent. He'd asked JoJo to let him know how the meeting with Grandmaster Kino and Alo Quinn and Rev Clark had gone and JoJo just happened to call during inspection.

His fellow red-team members had a bunch of questions for him after the Commander left and Gabe did the best he could to explain about the dreams and visions he sometimes received. Finally, he'd checked his coming weekly schedule to make sure he had it memorized, asked his team if they felt confident for the coming week, said his prayers and slept like rock.

Gabe was raring to go the next morning. It would be his first day of online classes at USC along with his regular training. His time for study would be intermittent during the day. He'd have less time to eat. Less down time. But all things considered, it was doable.

This morning, he woke, washed, dressed, prayed, read his Bible for only ten minutes, and stood for inspection. They had to run two miles before breakfast. After the run, he made a quick video and headed into breakfast. As usual, he was the last one in, because he tried to make his videos each morning because he didn't want his little

online ministry to dwindle.

Gabe got about five whole steps inside the cafeteria and stopped short. The entire room, over a hundred people, stood and applauded. Gabe looked behind him to see who'd come into the room, but there was no one there. He turned back around, and looked into the faces of his team. He pointed at himself. "Is this about me?" he mouthed.

Everyone laughed and Gabe's face reddened.

A man Gabe had never met before walked to the front of the room and motioned for Gabe to join him. Gabe approached him and the room became quiet. The man was wearing a black suit with the new Ameritech Eagle emblem on the breast pocket. He looked about the same age as his father. The man smiled and held his hand out to Gabe, which Gabe shook and gave a slight bow.

"Agent Tanner, my name is William Bradshaw. I'm the Chief Commander of this training facility."

"Oh, Chief Commander Bradshaw. Um, it's very nice to meet you sir."

"You as well, Agent Tanner. You've been training for all of one week and not a day has gone by that some news of your exploits hasn't come to my ears."

Gabe swallowed hard, wondering if maybe he was in some kind of trouble.

The Chief smiled. "Most of those things can be addressed in our grading and point system when it's time to evaluate or honor our recruits. However, there are two things I felt needed to be addressed right now."

Gabe frowned and sighed and glanced around because he was really wishing this could be a private conversation.

"Is there a problem, Tanner?"

"Oh, well, no sir. I was just wondering if maybe this could be more like a private conversation?"

"No sir. I don't think it can be. We, all of us in this room, Thirty JETT trainees, eighty-four agent trainees, four unit Commanders, ten agents, and ten or more other employees of Ameritech felt the need to offer their thanks to you for saving the lives of Commander Edwards and Agent Booth."

Gabe looked down, relieved he wasn't being called out for something, though he was not looking for accolades either.

The Chief went on. "Some of us here may not understand how you were able to take such definitive action based on a simple dream, but there are some of us who do. I am one of those. Nothing is random. I know that you of all people know that. You're only eighteen and you've had a number of experiences over the past year that have changed your life."

Gabe blinked and nodded. "Yes sir."

"We all just wanted to recognize you and honor you this morning. So, Agent Tanner if you will please stand at attention."

Gabe sighed and stood at attention.

A clerk stepped forward and handed Chief Commander Bradshaw a small ribbon with a medal attached. The medal was gold and round with an eagle in the middle and the word valor under the eagle. He pinned the ribbon on the front pocket of Gabe's

camo shirt. He then took a step back. Gabe watched, his eyes opening wide, as the Chief Commander and everyone else in the cafeteria bowed to him. This was the same as a salute in the military, but Ameritech was founded by Jason Lee who was a martial artist and they bowed to show respect. Gabe swallowed hard and bowed in return.

"Now," the Chief Commander went on. "We have one more thing to discuss. The first night Agent Tanner had to report last week, he was almost late."

Gabe sighed. Would he ever live that down?

The man continued. "Agent Tanner was almost late because he stopped to help change a tire for an elderly couple on the highway. He explained that he chose to take the chance of being late because he was now an Ameritech Agent, and an Agent would stop to help someone, even if it made them late. He said he was willing to accept the consequences."

Gabe's brow furrowed.

The Chief went on. "I believe any one of us would have stopped to help this elderly couple because *that* is the caliber of people we hire. However, Agent Tanner went above and beyond. He got their number and followed up with them to make sure they were able to get their tire repaired and then asked them if he could do anything else to help them. Yard work. Something repaired around the house. They turned him down."

Gabe frowned.

"I'm sure Agent Tanner is wondering how I came to know this because he certainly didn't make this information known."

Chief Bradshaw smiled and Gabe nodded at him.

"Well, young man, it's because the elderly couple you stopped to help, just happened to be my parents."

The crowd murmured. Gabe's facial expression showed the shock he felt. Then he quickly looked down. He certainly did not want all of this acclaim or recognition for doing something anyone would do.

"And so, Agent Tanner, I just wanted to thank you publicly for not only helping my parents, but for representing Ameritech is such a noble way. I can tell that you are not pleased with this public recognition but you will just have to suck it up, because the example you are setting needs to be copied by the others in this room." He smiled. "Is there anything you'd like to say?"

Gabe nodded. "If I said 'no' then all of my team and Commander Edwards would know that I'm being dishonest."

The room at large laughed.

The Chief stood to the side so Gabe could address the room.

Gabe looked out over the group. "Though I truly appreciate Chief Commander Bradshaw going to all this trouble to recognize me, I really am uncomfortable receiving it. I absolutely know that what I did, anyone here would do. So, it's not a big deal. I mean, not really. I know that for every person who gets recognized for doing a good deed, there are hundreds more who did the same thing in secret. In secret is how I like to operate, though I realize sometimes that's not possible. But in secret, then it's just between me and God and I work for Him. So, like, I've recently been told to follow the

scripture in Matthew 5:16 where it says, 'Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven.' It feels like a very hard thing for me to do. The thing is, I know you all do good deeds.

"I have a deep love and respect for Ameritech and all of their agents. I've never met an agent that I didn't love and respect and I've met a lot of them. What Chief Lee has created here at Ameritech, it is such a beautiful thing and really, I just wanted to be a part of it. That's all. Please forgive me for always seeming to step into the limelight. I don't mean to. I don't like it. I don't want it. If it helps others to reach for something more to serve God, so be it. But believe me, I don't think highly of myself. I mean, well, I have confidence, in like, a humble kind of way." He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Well, that just sounds stupid."

"Yeah it does," one of his team said loudly.

Gabe smiled. "Anyway, thanks Chief Commander Bradshaw for this really cool award and I'll try to live up to it. I don't know about y'all, but I'm really hungry. Whaddya say we eat?"

The Chief smiled and nodded. "By all means. You're dismissed."

Gabe shook the man's hand again, sighed and went to grab a tray. He sat down at one of the round tables, with a couple guys from another unit, blessed his food and began eating fast in case he ran out of time. He looked up to see a couple of young females approach with trays and take a seat at his table.

He offered a friendly smile and nodded. "Hello."

"Hello Agent Tanner."

"I haven't seen you here before," Gabe said.

The blonde shrugged with a smile. "Are you sure?"

Gabe nodded. "Yep, I'm pretty sure, because I would have noticed a bunch of young pretty girls."

"Good one, Tanner," one of the guys said.

The second girl giggled. "A bunch?"

Gabe smiled and nodded toward the north end of the room. "There are several more over there, I'd say about twelve, which means you're a unit, right?"

"Very good," the blonde said. "You're sharp. But ya know, it's a little insulting to be called a 'girl'."

"Oh, well, what are you then?" Agent Blade asked.

"We are women, or ladies. I hardly think we are little girls."

Gabe rolled his eyes. "I didn't say you were little girls, I said you were pretty girls, but I didn't mean to insult you, and really, just don't be so testy."

"Well, how would you feel if I called you a boy."

Gabe smiled. "Well, it wouldn't bother me a bit."

"You wouldn't find that insulting?"

"Nope. Not at all. I *am* a boy. I pretty much am a kid."

"How can you say that and still be an effective Ameritech Agent?"

Gabe grinned. "Confidence. Don't worry, you'll gain that as you train."

Gabe looked around at the laughter of his fellow Red Unit team members and

suddenly felt bad for being so flippant, so he changed his tone. “Um, so, you ladies are just getting started?”

“Yes, training just started last night at 9:00 PM. They start the females a week behind the guys.”

Gabe nodded. “And there’s only one female unit?”

“Yes. Not as many females have their sites on being an agent.”

Gabe nodded again. “I get that.”

“So, Agent Tanner, tell me, are you still together with Taylor Kino?” the blonde asked.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Well, you called us pretty and I was wondering if you were flirting.”

“Oh! No, not at all. I call it like I see it. Sorry, I didn’t mean to be degrading in any way and if Taylor were here, she would agree with me.”

“You don’t think she’d be insulted?”

Gabe grinned. “Taylor? Nope. She has too much confidence for that and she’s gorgeous and she knows I’m totally in love with her.”

“Absolutely totally?”

“Absolutely totally.”

“Then there’s no chance for me?”

Gabe frowned. “None. And especially not now.”

“Why especially not now?”

“Because I wouldn’t be interested in any girl who would knowingly try to steal the boyfriend of another girl.”

Everyone at the table chuckled.

The blonde smiled and shrugged. “I wouldn’t. I was testing you to see if you are the real deal. Looks like you are. It’s been great entertainment.”

Gabe rolled his eyes. “Well then, so glad I could entertain you.” He rose and picked up his tray. “Have a great first day.”

“You too, Agent Tanner. Hope to see you around.”

“Who knows,” Gabe said shortly and joined his team as they left the cafeteria.

✝✝✝

January 20th Monday Afternoon Pine Forest, Georgia

As Lizzy drove home from the doctor, she glanced up in the rear view mirror to check on Iris. She was sound asleep in her car seat. Lizzy sighed. It had been a strange week. Gabe left, which of course, broke Iris’ heart. Then Iris started with a head cold. Justice Sawyer arrived last Monday and Iris was immediately drawn to him, as was Lily. Lizzy smiled as she thought about sweet Lily, who somehow got it in her head that she would end up an old maid. It seemed that the man who is a direct descendent of the original owner of the Sawyer house suddenly showing up was certainly divinely planned. Then Justice’s grandfather, Thomas Sawyer is next to arrive in town and they find he is like Grandmaster Kino. “One of the twelve,” whatever that entails.

Then in the wee hours of Saturday morning, they get a call from Gabe that he had a dream and he rushes to save Commander Edwards. Then just a few hours later they

have a big breakfast for Justice and his grandfather and then most of them head over to the old Sawyer house and rebuke evil and pray and sing. That was a good and righteous thing, though the thought that there was evil forces in the home wasn't a very pleasant thought. Their goal was to eradicate the darkness. Lizzy had hoped that one meeting at the home would do it, but it looked like it was gonna be a bigger challenge.

Once they'd left the house Saturday, Justice and Lily were walking along Main Street when a man on a bicycle rode up the sidewalk. He was wearing a black hoodie and they couldn't see his face. He came right at Lily. Justice jumped in front of him and pushed the bike away. The guy crashed. Justice turned for just a split second to make sure Lily was okay, turned back and the guy was gone. No man. No bike. Vanished. Completely. It was crazy, but they couldn't deny it. This made everyone realize they were facing quite a strong enemy. There would be fasting and much prayer required in order to battle what was in the house.

Sunday was a lovely church service and then a large dinner at the Inn with the entire family, except Gabe. The group included almost all of the significant others; Nolan Sawyer, Jericho Jones, CJ Blackmon, and Justice Sawyer. Only Brody Smith was missing. Now, this morning, as promised, Lizzy took Iris in to see the doctor because her cold hadn't gotten better. She'd actually begun to run a fever and it was a good thing Lizzy had taken her in. Iris was diagnosed with a viral upper respiratory infection but also had strep throat, a bacterial infection.

Lizzy was pondering everything when her phone rang. "Accept," she said.

"Sorry it took me so long to get back to you, sweetheart. Things are getting ready to go down up in Rome. How's Iris?"

"She has strep throat and also a URI. The doctor called in some Amoxicillin but it's not ready yet. Do you think you can pick it up for me? I need to get home to nurse or pump depending on whether Daisy and Violet have had to feed the babies or not."

"Of course, sweetheart. I'll take care of it. I'm leaving the office in a few minutes. Where are you?"

"I'm about to pull into our drive."

"Okay. I'll be there in about thirty minutes or so."

"Thanks, Keegan."

"You're welcome. Don't worry, Elizabeth."

She sighed. "What makes you think I'm worried?"

"I can hear it in your voice."

"I'm sorry. I mean, the kids have been sick plenty of times, but for some reason, this feels strange. Almost like when Gabe took a turn in the hospital."

"I understand. Keep positive thoughts and when I get home we'll pray over our girl."

"Okay. Sounds good," Lizzy said bravely as she pulled into the garage and turned off the engine. As soon as she did, Iris woke and began to cry.

"Oh, sweetie," Lizzy purred. "Mommy's here. Let's go inside and get you comfortable."

"I want Daddy."

"I'm on my way, baby girl," Keegan answered.

Iris sniffed. "I want Gabe."

"Gabe isn't home," Keegan said firmly.

"I want him," Iris cried.

"Maybe we'll try to call him later," Lizzy said, knowing full well it was gonna be hard to do.

Lizzy opened the back door and lifted Iris into her arms. "Come on, sweetheart. Let's go see if Isaiah and GenGen are sleeping."

Iris sniffed. "Can I hold them?"

"No, baby, because you're sick. You don't want the babies to catch what you have and get sick, do you?"

She shook her head and then laid it down on her mother's shoulder.

Keegan sighed. "Jesus, protect her and heal her," he plead softly.

✝✝✝

January 20th Late Monday Afternoon

Main Street, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jericho Jones came out of *Appel Martial Arts*, glanced to his left and across the street to eye the old Sawyer Home, now known as *Lily's Place*. Lily and Justice were standing out front talking with a man. A white F-250 pickup with *Hanley's Construction* printed on the sides was parked in front of the house. Jericho smiled. He guessed they weren't wasting any time. He crossed Main Street and headed straight to the GTCC.

Rose was manning the front desk because Daisy was at home helping with the babies while Mrs. Tanner took Iris to the doctor. Jericho hoped all was well in that department. Rose looked up when he came in. Her beautiful smile made his heart beat a little faster. It never got old.

"Hey big guy," she said.

"Hey RoseRose," he quipped, and was pleased to see her smile widen.

"I didn't see you pull in."

He nodded. "I'm parked over in front of *Appel Martial Arts*. I've been using his equipment to rehab the leg."

Rose looked him over. He was a big guy. Handsome guy. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Strong. A special ops firefighter and paramedic with high credentials. He was dressed casually, in black sweat pants and a gray sweatshirt with a special ops firefighter emblem on the breast.

"So, how is the rehab coming?" she asked.

"Gettin' stronger every day. The leg is still weaker than the other one, but I actually doubled the amount of weight I was pushin' today."

"Awesome! Any pain?"

"Nope. None. I'm almost back to normal."

"I'm so happy for you. I'm so proud of you."

He grinned and reached out and touched her face. "Come out from behind that counter so I can let you show me how proud you are of me."

She giggled and looked around. The only thing going on currently was a lady's

fitness class for the elderly in the gym and some children's reading groups back in the classrooms.

Moving forward, she put her arms around his neck. He didn't kiss her right away. He looked into her eyes.

"What?"

"I've missed you," he said softly.

"We were just together at dinner last night at the Inn."

He nodded. "Yeah, it's been about twenty hours."

She smiled. "But who's counting?"

"Exactly," he said. "Remember that just a month ago I was such a mess, barely able to move around and take care of myself?"

"I remember."

"And you were so worried about me."

"I was concerned," Rose corrected with a smile.

He chuckled. "Now that I'm almost all the way back, it feels good to be able to stand here in front of you and feel like a man again."

"In my eyes your manhood was never in question."

He smiled. "You're an amazing girl, RoseRose."

"You're an amazingly good man, Jericho."

Finally, he bent his head and kissed her. Slowly. Softly. When he pulled back he smiled. "I love you, Rose."

She smiled up at him. "I love you too. It almost feels surreal, or too good to be true. After Mike, I wondered if there was any man out there in the world who could fill my father's shoes, and only a few weeks later, you walk up behind me and hold my ladder."

He brushed his hand over her cheek. "Because it was meant to be. Not that I think I can fill your father's shoes. He's a great man, but I *do* want to try."

"I have faith in you," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

He nodded, pulled away so he could see her face and smiled. "Good. So, will you meet me at Joe's tonight?"

Her brow furrowed. "Well, that was quite a segue."

He shrugged. "Sorry. I was going down a list in my head. See Rose. Kiss Rose. Tell Rose I love her. Have her meet me at Joe's."

Rose giggled. "You're a very logical thinker."

He shrugged. "I'm a man."

"Yes you are," she purred as she raised up onto her toes, pressed close and offered her mouth.

He took the offering. When he pulled away he smiled at her. "I have to get going. I have a lot of things to take care of today."

"Well, maybe at Joe's tonight you can fill me in on everything."

"I will. We're going to Joe's as sort of a celebration. The guys will all be there, and CJ and Violet. But for now, in a nutshell, I will tell you this; I am officially joining with Ameritech, and we are looking for property to buy to turn into a training center right here in Pine County!"

Rose's mouth opened in surprise. "Oh Jericho! Wow! Really? You're kidding me, right?"

He chuckled. "I am NOT kidding you. I will be over the entire Special Ops LAW Firefighter-Rescue and Medical Division of Ameritech."

"LAW?"

"Land, air and water. L, A, W."

"Wow. Just wow, Jericho. I am so proud of you."

He smiled. "Thank you, my Rose. Glad I can make you proud. I wish I could say the same thing about my father."

She sighed. "You already told him?"

"Yes, only because he tried to call me when I was on the phone with Jason last night. When I called him back he asked me why I didn't answer the phone and I told him I was on an important call and then I told him what was happening and he was, I guess you could say, less than impressed."

Rose shook her head. "He'll come around."

"It would be nice, if he does, but ya know what? It doesn't really matter. I've made it. I'm about to take off and it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't come here to Pine Forest. God is so good."

Rose grinned. "He is indeed. So, does my father know about it?"

"Of course. He's thinking of not just a firefighter training ground here in Pine County, but a big new Ameritech Agent training ground for the eastern division and he and Jason are already discussing it."

"Oh, Jericho, this is amazing. I'm so excited!"

"Me too. But for now, I really have to get going. I'll see you tonight at Joe's at 7:00. Don't be late."

"I'm never late," she said cutely.

Jericho kissed her quickly and ran out the door. She watched him cross the street and head to his truck. She felt like jumping for joy. She'd been thinking that wherever he went, she'd go with him, even though she never wanted to leave Pine Forest. She loved him and she was willing to follow him. He'd opened an office here, and that was great, but he didn't know if it would be permanent. Now, she wouldn't have to leave. She could have her cake and eat it too!

✝✝✝

January 20th Late Afternoon

Lily's Place, Main Street, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice saw Mr. Hanley off, watching him drive his truck up Main Street, pass the *Main Street Market* and turned right. Turning, Justice headed back inside and to the kitchen where he thought Lily would be, but she wasn't there.

He looked around himself. Tomorrow, the demolition will begin. The entire kitchen will be gutted. The windows on either side of the fireplace will be changed into doors. A giant deck will be built on that side of the home. The back door area will be completely redone, enlarged, a back loading area added, and eventually parking. The downstairs bathroom will be gutted and completely redone and another one added to

keep men and women separate. The stairs will be completely refurbished, and upstairs will change immensely.

The first bedroom that is at the front of the house will become a living/dining area. What is now the second bedroom, will become a kitchen. The third bedroom will remain a bedroom and the fourth bedroom will become a closet and bathroom.

Justice made his way up the stairs, still in search of Lily. He found her in that front bedroom, standing in front of one of the floor length windows that looked out over Main Street. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Whatcha thinkin' about, sweet Lily," he said softly into her ear.

She sighed. "About jumping," she said in a monotone.

He frowned. "What?" he said louder.

She startled and shook her head as if she just came out of a trance. "What?"

"What did you just say?"

"I said, 'what'," she answered, turning around to look into his eyes.

"No, before that. You said you were thinking about jumping?"

Her brow furrowed. "Did I say that?"

"Yeah, you did. What's going on?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. It was weird. It was as if I was dreaming for minute. Now that you say that, I think I actually was thinking about jumping. Isn't that silly? It was like someone was whispering to me in my head, 'jump, go ahead, jump, you know you want to, end all the pain, just end it. Just do it. But that would be silly. First, there is no pain. I'm happy. And if I jumped out the window, it really wouldn't end anything. I'd probably just break a leg or an arm. Now, if I were to jump off a cliff or something, now that would be more logical."

Justice looked into her eyes. "A cliff? Why did you say that?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It just popped into my brain. Why?"

"Lily, you know that's how Sara Sawyer killed herself?"

Lily frowned. "No, I didn't know how she did it. I didn't even know her name. I just know that Knox had a daughter who wanted to marry and he wouldn't let her and she took her own life."

Justice frowned. "Sara Sawyer went to Pine Mountain and threw herself off a hundred foot high ridge. And Lily, I am very concerned at what you just said. Someone was speaking to you, telling you to jump, to kill yourself? That is not a someone. That is some-thing. A demon. We have not cleared this house. That much is obvious. And I'm thinking I don't want you to come here anymore."

"That's silly. We're about to renovate the whole place and I will be here throughout the whole process."

"Lily, you're in danger. I can't have it."

"Remember you said that you wouldn't try to tell me what to do? You would only offer assistance?"

"Yes, I do remember, but that was different. This is about your safety. We now have a relationship, and I care about what happens to you, Lily, and I have to protect you. I can't let anything happen to you."

She sighed. “Oh, Justice, I want to argue with you, but how can I argue with someone who wants to protect me?”

He smiled. “Right? So, I’m thinking you shouldn’t come here anymore.”

She sighed. “Well, I *am* going to come here. Besides, me not coming here won’t help protect me. I mean, I was walking down Main Street when whatever that was on that bike came at me. I wasn’t even in the house. So, that means, they can come after me no matter where I am.”

Justice sighed. “Okay, maybe that’s so. But they are stronger here. Lily, at least don’t come here alone. Promise me.”

She smiled. “Okay. I won’t come here alone anymore.”

“And before you walk in the door of this place, you have to ask God to protect you. Put on the armor.”

She nodded. “I will. I promise.”

He tilted her face up and kissed her, then pulled away and searched her face. “Lily, I, well, I have very strong feelings for you.”

She smiled, her eyes twinkling.

He frowned. “And I don’t want anything to happen to you. We have to clean this house of the evil that is lurking here. They seemed to be targeting you. We’re gonna have to fast and pray and gather strength and do it right. This can’t go on.”

She sighed. “Well, I’m willing to do whatever has to be done. We can get others to help too. We can do this.”

He nodded. “I’m gonna talk to everyone about it.”

“Well, everyone is gonna be at Joe’s tonight. Maybe you can start the ball rolling. I mean, I’m sure my family will join us, and the Appels and Stewarts, and I’ll ask Gabe and he’ll get Taylor on board, and she’ll get her whole family on board. We can do this.”

He let out a breath. “Yes, with God’s help we can. So then, the sooner the better. Let’s not procrastinate.”

“Okay. But really, right now, I have to go home and get ready for dinner at Joe’s and make sure Mom doesn’t need my help with anything.”

“Let’s lock up and head out. But first, let’s pray.”

Lily bowed her head and Justice prayed. “Father God, we ask you to give us strength and power and wisdom in battling these dark forces. We ask your protection over Lily and actually, for everyone we know. We ask you to clean this house of darkness and fill it with your light, in Jesus’ mighty name, amen.”

“Amen,” Lily said loudly. She smiled. “Amen,” she shouted. “Amen! Do you hear that? We rebuke you, Satan. We rebuke you darkness! We rebuke you in the name of the one true Son, the only begotten Son of the Father, Jesus Christ. BE GONE!” she yelled.

Justice chuckled, but then frowned when he actually felt the floor begin to shake. He shook his head. “Well then, Miss Lily Tanner, I believe they didn’t like that. You certainly stirred them up.”

She smiled. “Good. Now they know we’re not playing around.”

✝✝✝

January 20th 2:00 PM Monday Afternoon

Lake Crossings Elementary School, Huntington Beach, California

Brittney's teacher smiled at her. "Okay, Brittney, it's your turn. Please come to the front of the circle right here next to me and show us what you brought to share with the class."

Brittney grabbed her backpack and headed to the front next to her teacher. She set her backpack on the floor and unzipped it and pulled out her big stuffed Panda Bear that she got for Christmas. Her eyes were shining with excitement.

"Oh my, that is lovely," her teacher said. "Can you tell us about it?"

Brittney nodded. "Yes ma'am. This is a Panda bear. It's the best Christmas present I ever got. One time my teacher got me a smaller bear, a brown one, but my mom threw it away and I cried. But now I have this one and I love it. It's really soft and cuddly and I like to sleep with it at night."

"Well, Brittney, thank you for sharing this with us."

"You're welcome. Would you like to feel how soft it is?"

The teacher smiled and nodded. "Oh my goodness, it is super soft!"

"Can I feel?" one of the kids asked.

Brittney took it to him and let him feel it. He smiled and nodded. "It's soft," he affirmed.

Brittney then took the bear around the circle so each member of the class could feel how soft the Panda was, and finally she put it back in her pack and took her seat, smiling in contentment.

Later that same day, while Brittney was waiting in the line for children to be picked up by their parents, she stood next to a girl that was in her class and she smiled at her. "Hi Lindy."

"Hi," Lindy answered.

"So, how come you didn't bring anything for show and tell today?"

Lindy shrugged. "I couldn't think of what to bring."

Brittney nodded. "I couldn't think of what to bring either and then my new mom asked me what is something I have that I really love, and I remembered the Panda. So, do you have something that you really love?"

Lindy shook her head.

"Maybe you could ask your mom to give you uh idea of something."

Lindy shook her head. "I can't ask her cuz my mom isn't coming back. That's what my dad says."

"Oh. Is she dead?"

"No."

"Did she go to jail?"

"No."

"Did she go to the hospital?"

"No. She just went away."

"Oh. Well, um, do you have a brother?"

"No. But I have a sister."

"Well, you could ask her if she has uh idea."

Lindy shook her head. "No, cuz she says I'm a pain."

"Oh. How about your dad?"

Lindy shook her head. "My dad only talks to his new girlfriend and tells me to stop interrupting him. He says I do it on purpose to get attention."

"Oh." Brittney frowned. "I'm sorry, Lindy."

Lindy shrugged.

Brittney sighed. "Ya know what? I think I can make you feel better."

"How?"

Brittney unzipped her pack and pulled out the Panda bear. "Here."

Lindy's eyes opened wide.

"You can take him home and sleep with him. He's really soft and he makes you feel happy when you're going to sleep."

Lindy looked up at Brittney with big eyes. "You're giving him to me?"

Brittney nodded. She swallowed hard. "I think you need him more than me. At night, when you feel sad or alone, just talk to him. And something that's even better is you can talk to Jesus. He listens and He helps me feel happier. I didn't know about Jesus before, but God is his daddy and he got power and he can help you. I just start talking to Him and when I do, I always feel better."

Lindy nodded and took the bear and hugged it to her heart, then looked up. "He smells good."

Brittney smiled and nodded her head. "That's cuz my new mommy sprayed some of her perfume on him cuz I told her how much I love the way she smells."

Lindy took another big sniff of the bear and then smiled. "Thanks, Brittney. I'm gonna love him always."

Brittney nodded, her eyes moistening.

"Lindy come on. What are you waiting for?"

Brittney looked up to see a woman step out of her car. "Who's that?"

"That's my father's girlfriend."

Brittney frowned. "She looks mean."

"She is mean. Well, I gotta go."

Brittney nodded. "Okay, bye."

Lindy started to walk away, but Brittney called after her.

"Wait, Lindy. Stop."

She stopped. Brittney ran out to her, took the Panda, hugged it hard, then handed it back to her. "Okay. Bye."

"Bye, Brittney. See ya tomorrow."

Brittney nodded and waved.

"Brittney!"

She turned to see Amari yelling at her. She ran to him.

"Where were you going?" he asked.

"I was just sayin' goodbye to Lindy."

"Okay, well, come stand here next to me, cuz I see Mom and Dad coming up." He glanced down at her. "So, like, was that your bear that Lindy was holding?"

Brittney nodded and sighed.

"Did she take it from you?"

"No. I gave it to her."

"Why? You love that bear."

"Lindy's mommy went away and her new mommy is mean and so I gave her Panda so she won't be lonely and she'll be happier."

Amari smiled and nodded. "That was pretty cool, Britt."

Brittney smiled.

In the car pick up line, Bree looked over at her husband. "So, what do you think that was all about?"

"It appears our girl has given her favorite gift away to a friend."

"I wonder why she did that?"

"I'm guessing Brittney believes her friend needs it more than her."

Bree's eyes moistened. "That is a beautiful thing, Ricky. In so many ways, you know?"

He nodded. "One of the most beautiful things I've witnessed in a long time. We'll have to make time to talk to her about it tonight."

✝✝✝

January 20th Monday Evening

Joe's Bar and Grill, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose pulled into the parking lot of Joe's. She glanced over at Violet in her passenger seat. Her sister looked like an angel, well, a sexy angel. She wore a white knit, long sleeved dress with a square neckline. It was short, only to mid-thigh, and she wore knee-high brown suede boots. Around her shoulders she had a white knit shawl, with brown fringe. Her long wavy blond hair hung loosely down her back. She was stunning. Rose smiled.

"What are you smiling at?" Violet asked her.

"I was just thinking about how beautiful my baby sister is."

Violet laughed. "Baby? Gen is a baby. Or Iris. I'm only a few minutes younger than you."

Rose nodded. "Violet, seriously, I'm so proud to have you as my sister."

Violet frowned. "Are you sick?"

"No, why?"

"So, you're not dying of some incurable disease?"

Rose snorted. "No, you idiot. Can't I even compliment you on anything without you acting a fool?"

Violet smiled. "Yes, you can. And you, my older sister, I'm proud to have you as my sister. So proud. You are an amazing person, Rose. And so beautiful. Aren't you glad I talked you into wearing that dress?"

Rose giggled. "And aren't you glad I strapped on my belt and holster under the dress?"

Violet laughed. “I can’t wait to see if he does what you said he’d do.”

“You just watch. He’ll reach out and touch me here, on the front of my hip to see if I’m carrying, and this time, he’ll be surprised that I actually am. The only difference is it won’t be tucked inside my underwear. I mean, realistically speaking, my panties aren’t sturdy enough to hold the gun.”

Violet giggled. “Ya know what? I think I’m gonna work on getting some specially made sturdy leather underwear that will hold it. That’ll be next year’s birthday gift to you.”

Rose laughed. “I can’t wait. Well, let’s go in.”

Violet nodded. “There’s an awful lotta people here. Jericho must be very popular in this town.”

“He’s quite the charmer, that’s for sure.”

They headed into Joe’s. The place was packed. Melaynah held the door open for them. “Hey! I was wondering if you two were ever coming in.”

“Hey, Bugs. How’s it goin?”

“Hmm, since I spoke to you this morning? Let’s see, the DOT guys arrived and began clearing the land from the Highway to what will be mine and Jake’s home and my stables and corral.”

“That is awesome. How long will it take them to finish the clearing?”

“Only a few more days. And then we have some guys coming out to pour some gravel. And then some more guys are coming out to clear out the land for the house and the stable and then, we can lay the foundation and my dad and I wanna get started on that asap.”

“I’m so excited for you, Laynah.”

The beautiful red-head grinned. “Me too. I want to have at least the foundation for stables poured by the end of the month. I don’t want to start on the plans for the house until I get Jake’s final nod.”

“Did he call today like you thought he might?”

She shook her head. “No. Not yet. Still hoping. It’s been almost two weeks.” Melaynah shook her head. “But no negative talk right now. This is a celebration.”

Jericho finally came up behind Melaynah. “You’re hogging my girl.”

Laynah grinned. “She was hogging me.”

CJ also arrived. “Hello ladies.”

Violet turned and smiled up at her guy. “Hey, CJ.”

“You look beautiful tonight,” he said.

“Thanks. You too.”

Jericho snorted.

Violet giggled. “You know what I mean.”

CJ took her hand and pulled her in. “We have a table over there. What can I get you to drink?”

“Some ginger ale would be good.”

“Got it.”

Jericho took Rose’s hand and led her to the table. He sat her down. “Would you

like some white wine?"

Rose nodded. "That would be great, thanks."

Jericho and CJ met Laynah at the bar. "Whaddya think, Melaynah? Do you think they suspect?"

Melaynah shook her head. "I don't think so. If they do, then they're Oscar worthy actresses."

Jericho nodded. "Good." He checked the time. "Gabe won't be available for another twenty-five minutes. That should be about perfect. And you have his info so you can live-stream on his site, right?"

"I've got it. It's not my first rodeo. Calm down. It's all good."

Jericho drew a deep breath.

Melaynah giggled. "I can't believe you're the same guy who calmly and efficiently saved the lives of my mother and baby brother and sister."

CJ chuckled. "He's got you all fooled."

Jericho rolled his eyes, drew a deep breath, let it out and nodded. "I'm gonna go dance with my girl."

Jericho took the glass of wine and a beer and headed to the table. He set the drinks down.

Rose smiled up at him, picked up her wine and held it up. "Here's to you, Jericho. Congratulations on your new affiliation with Ameritech!"

He tapped his beer to her glass and nodded. "Thanks, babe. I think this is gonna be amazing. Here's to all the great successes this merger will bring." He swigged the beer and Rose sipped her wine.

They chatted a few minutes and then he asked her to dance with him.

He led her out to dance floor, took both her hands in his and looked her over. "You look absolutely beautiful tonight." His eyes scanned over the white dress covered with red roses, but stopped at her midsection. He frowned.

She smiled and waited. He reached out and pressed his hand against her right, lower abdominal/hip area. His eyes opened wide and looked at her. She couldn't hold in the giggle.

He cleared his throat. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yeah, really. Wanna see?"

He choked. "Um, not here."

She laughed and looked over at Violet who was also laughing and obviously telling CJ what was so funny.

Jericho pulled Rose close. "So, are you sure that's secure in there?"

Rose giggled. "It's not really tucked in my underwear. I have a leather belt on and I clipped the holster to the belt. So I cheated."

He chuckled. "And you felt you needed the protection tonight?"

"No, silly, I feel completely safe with you around. It was all just for the fun of seeing your reaction."

"Ya know, Rose, I have a feeling that life with you would never be boring."

"Not ever," Rose said with a giggle.

CJ and Violet joined them on the dance floor. Rose looked around to see who else was there to celebrate the new LAW Firefighter-Rescue and Medical Division of Ameritech. She waved at Heather and Nolan who were also on the dance floor.

She spotted Jericho's guys. Four of them were playing pool, Jimmy Callaway, Max Hooks, Micah Ferguson and Jalen Shipley. The oldest one of Jericho's bunch, Luke Jackson, was actually sitting at the keyboard on the tiny stage, though one could hardly call it a stage. More like a platform. It held a keyboard and an old set of drums and amps and mics. Joe only had live music on the weekends. He liked giving a platform, literally, to some of the local musicians. If they turned out to be any good, they were sometimes invited back, or even better, asked to perform at the Ritz, over on College Street, which was run by Joe's daughter Megan. Rose wondered if Luke was a musician and if he was about to give a performance.

Rose and Violet both smiled and waved as Daisy and Lily and Justice and his grandfather Thomas came in the door and right behind them, Jodi, John, Hannah, Charlie and Matt.

"Wow, Jericho," Rose said. "The whole town is here. It looks like you are a very popular guy."

Jericho smiled. "I don't know about all that, but what we do affects the whole county. And what's coming could affect more than that. This is huge. A large training facility means there will be a need for more housing for the people hired to train, more food, more downtime places, like for entertainment. More families will move to the area. It's gonna be pretty darn interesting."

"Hmm, I wonder what Mayor Bradbury thinks about all this."

"Oh, he's all in. Though he wants to be involved and stay on top of things because he doesn't want to lose the Main Street vibe Pine Forest has going, so he wants to monitor all permits."

"That sounds fair. And good, actually. I don't want Pine Forest to lose it's hometown thing. It's what everyone loves. It's not run down. It's old-fashioned on the outside but up-to-date on what it offers. It's super clean. It's super friendly. We have to hold on to all of that."

"Absolutely." Jericho smiled down at her. "Ya know Rose, maybe you should run for town council."

She laughed. "I'm a little too abrasive for that."

"You're smart, logical, tactful when you wanna be. Honest. Straight shooter. You'd be perfect."

"You are so silly, besides, I don't have time for that."

"Well, just keep the idea on the back burner."

"I have a better idea, Jericho. *You* run for town council and I'll nag at you behind the scenes and *you* can get everything done my way."

He chuckled. "Anyway, Mayor Bradbury is actually here tonight. He's gonna help make the announcement."

"Wow, this really is amazing." Rose looked up and waved as Rebecca and Dalton came in with Lucas. She sighed. "Wow, everyone is here. I wish Iris wasn't sick. I'm

sure Mom and Dad would've loved to come and celebrate with you."

"Well, both your mom and dad, and Chaz and Lisa Stewart are missing out on the celebration, but we arranged to do a livestream for them, so, Melaynah is gonna be signing onto Gabe's website in just a minute, because we are about to make the big announcement to the crowd."

"Oh, cool! And good job on being so thoughtful," Rose said.

Jericho smiled at her and pulled her to a stop and raised her chin. He kissed her right there in the middle of the dance floor just as "*Slow Dancin' in a Parking Lot*" ended. He nervously glanced at the big clock on the wall. It's show time.

✝✝✝

Proverbs 19:21

"Many are the plans in the mind of a man,
but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand."

Chapter Seventeen

January 20th 4:30 PM PST Monday Early Evening
Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

The Red, Blue and Black JETT trainees sat together in a large classroom. They'd been watching a tutorial on monitoring advances in the tech world on the giant screen. Ameritech was known for having the latest military grade toys.

The video ended and the blue team unit commander walked to the front of the room. "I'm Unit Commander Desmond Badger, for those who don't know me. I Command the Blue team. You guys about ready to break?"

"Yes sir," they all answered.

"Well, it's a little early, but we ended this day early for a reason. We're about to watch a livestream of an important announcement that has to do with Ameritech. The rest of the company will be getting a notice, but Chief Lee decided it would be nice to announce it to this particular group since you're all together and this livestream also happens to have a personal connection to Agent Tanner."

Gabe sat up straight.

Commander Badger smiled. "Tell me, Agent Tanner, do you have any idea what is taking place?"

"No sir."

"Well, you'll soon see what the personal connection is. Don't worry Tanner, you're not being called out and since you already expressed this morning that you don't like to receive accolades, you can rest assured that there are no accolades being dished out this afternoon."

The agents in the room chuckled.

"I will ask you all to remain silent during the entire livestream so that Agent Tanner can hear the important words that will be spoken on this livestream. I will say that he certainly merits the opportunity to be able to witness this event happening in his own home town." The man glanced at his watch, picked up the remote and turned on the monitor.

Gabe looked up to see a very familiar place. The Commander spoke again. "Gabe, the monitor will obey your voice commands, so if you will feel free to pause and explain what is happening, or who the people are, it will be like inviting us all to your town to meet your friends and family."

Very alert now, Gabe nodded. "Oh, uh, yes sir. So, like, y'all just ask a question and I'll try to answer it."

"So, what are we lookin' at, Tanner?" one of the agents asked.

"Um, that's *Joe's Bar and Grill*. It's a real popular place on Main Street in Pine Forest, Georgia, where I grew up. Had my first beer there."

The crowd laughed, because they knew Gabe was only eighteen.

"Oh, uh, well, I mean, you know, southern town, Friday night, it happens. But I don't recommend it."

Another laugh.

He watched as the camera surveyed the place. It was packed full.

"Looks like a fun place," someone said.

"Oh, it is."

Suddenly a beautiful redhead smiled into the camera. "Hey everyone, my name is Laynah Appel, I'm Gabe's neighbor, and I'm livestreaming on Gabe's website right now with Taylor's permission of course, and I'm pretty sure that Gabe is watching too."

"Good Lord, that girl is a knockout," an agent said.

Gabe smiled. "She's my neighbor and she's married to a very lethal special forces Marine."

"Too bad," he muttered.

Melaynah went on. "We have a big announcement to make for Ameritech Security and since Gabe is currently training at Ameritech, we're doing this on his channel. I'm gonna turn the camera toward our beloved Mayor and let's get this announcement going!"

Melaynah pointed the camera toward the tiny platform stage.

"Hello, I'm Mayor Bradbury, mayor of the fine little town of Pine Forest. A few months ago a young man came to our town. He was the owner and CEO of his own business called *Elite Special Ops Fire and Rescue Services.* They train special operations fire fighters on land, air and water. They are five-star paramedics. They jump out of planes, and scuba dive into caves. They do it all. They go around teaching fire departments and rescue workers how to be the very best they can be. When I heard about them, I wanted to bring them to Pine Forest and make our little town a standout in the state. We scraped up the money and also had a few outright donations and brought this young man in, along with his five man team. What a blessing these men have been to our town.

"The man's name is Jericho Jones. His goal in life was not to become rich and famous. His goal was to save as many lives as possible. His goal was to help as many people as possible. There are now hundreds of people in our area, in Pine County and a few of the surrounding counties who are alive and well, thanks to Jericho's elite team, but even more importantly, we feel confident that we will be able to serve our community completely, no matter what we're confronted with. We recognize Jericho Jones, Jimmy Callaway, Max Hooks, Micah Ferguson, Luke Jackson and Jalen Shipley as extraordinary men in our community. Can we give them a hand?"

The camera shifted, zeroing in on the face of each man, beginning and ending with Jericho.

"Pause," Gabe said. "That is Jericho Jones. He's actually the twin brother of Joshua Jones with the Miami Dolphins. He's a very cool guy and he's dating my sister Rose. That's Rose standing right beside him." Gabe frowned. "Zoom in on the woman's hip," Gabe commanded.

"What are you lookin' at, Tanner?" Agent Cader asked.

Gabe smiled. "You see that bulge on her hip under her dress? She's carryin'." He laughed. "She always carries when she's wearing pants, but not when she's wearing a dress. So, this is kinda weird, and that makes me think she's playing a joke on Jericho."

They all chuckled. "Tanner, your sister is hot."

Gabe smiled. "All of my sisters are really pretty."

"Yeah, pretty," someone said.

"Zoom out," Gabe commanded. "Play."

"I'm gonna turn the microphone over to Mr. Jones to make the big announcement."

Jericho walked to the small platform and took the mic. "Thank you, Mayor." He smiled at the people and then at Melaynah's phone. "I won't beat around the bush. Because of the accolades put on our company and also because of Mr. Tanner, who is the Chief Director of Ameritech's Eastern Division, who brought Chief Jason Lee's attention to my little company, they have decided to make a new division of Ameritech Security. This new division's key areas of responsibility will be expertise for a specialized firefighter who is trained and equipped to handle most every emergency situation on land, in the air, in water, as well as provide medical assistance as needed. In short, we are about to create an Ameritech, special ops emergency rescue service."

He stopped as everyone cheered and applauded.

"Ameritech Security will absorb my company. We will be opening a new training ground facility right here in Pine Forest, and I will run the operation along with my five man team."

He waited again as everyone cheered.

Gabe paused the livestream as the agents in the room all exclaimed and voiced their approval. When they quieted, he continued.

Jericho went on. "Now, here's another aspect to this amazing development. The firefighters/rescue teams will be offered a chance to also train as agents for Ameritech. Aaand, the current Ameritech Agents will be offered the opportunity to cross-train as emergency rescue."

Gabe paused it again as the agents in the room cheered. When they finally quieted, he resumed play.

"Let me just make this point," Jericho went on. "This cross-training of Ameritech's people, will create, in essence, a super agent, one who can do it all. And not just do it all, but do it all better than anyone else. This is an amazing goal, an amazing opportunity, and I am totally jacked at the prospect. I am also so grateful to Chief Lee, Chief Tanner, and Chief Adams for giving me the opportunity of a lifetime. Let's applaud them for their forethought in taking Ameritech even higher than ever."

When the applause died down, Jericho smiled. "Now, there's more to our little livestream tonight. When I was only eighteen, just graduated from high school, I was slotted to play D-1 college football at Georgia, but I was injured in a fire. The fire was at the house of my closest friend. That fire took the lives of his family and ended my football career. That fire was why I became who I am and why I do what I do. I was recently reunited with that friend and guess what... I didn't even know that he's an

Ameritech Agent! He lives right here in Pine Forest and I'm going to turn the time over to him for a few minutes."

"Pause," Gabe said. "That is Agent CJ Blackmon. He's a great guy and he's dating Rose's twin, my sister Violet, who is a concert pianist."

"She's hot too," an agent said.

"Go figure, genius, she's her twin," another said.

Gabe smiled. "Play."

Gabe watched as CJ, still holding Violet's hand headed for the stage. She obviously tried to stay on the floor, but he smiled and pulled her onto the stage. "Please come stand beside me, Vi," you could hear him say.

CJ smiled at the camera and then spoke into the microphone. "Hello everyone. I'm Agent Carson Josiah Blackmon, but everyone just calls me CJ— unless I'm working, then they call me Agent Blackmon. That fire that took my family made a great man of Jericho Jones. It almost destroyed me. I lost my father, mother, younger brother and baby sister. I had a really rough time, and was lost in a deep dark hole for several years. It was Ameritech that brought me back, that brought me out of it. It was Chief Tanner that saw something in me and gave me the opportunity to climb out of that hole. I will be forever grateful to him and to God." He stopped and glanced at Violet.

"Because God and Chief Tanner helped me stand up and be a man again, I was finally able to see past my pain and make goals and realize that I want to serve God and I want to do great things with what was left of my life. I was eighteen when my family died. I was twenty-four when Chief Tanner accepted me into the fold. I'm now twenty-eight. It's been a long ten years. In the course of all this, I met my girl, Violet Tanner. And since we're live-streaming on Gabe Tanner's website, I will tell you she is one of his sisters. This beautiful girl, Violet Tanner, taught me so much. She taught me that no matter what your past, no matter how many mistakes you make, you can still start again and be happy. You can be forgiven and rise back up and fulfill your role.

"So, what role do I want to fulfill?" He turned to smile at Violet. "I want to spend the rest of my life loving and protecting this beautiful woman beside me."

Violet's face turned red and her eyes opened wide as CJ passed the mic to be held by Jericho, pulled a small velvet box from his pocket, got down on one knee and opened the box.

The entire crowd gasped. There were several squeals from Heather, Rose, Daisy, Lily, Laynah, Hannah, and other females in the room. There was even a rumbling coming from the men.

Lily looked up at Justice excitedly and he smiled at her. "Did you know about this?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No! I had no idea, but oh my goodness I am so totally happy for Violet. This is awesome!"

Justice smiled. "It's pretty darn cool."

"Violet," CJ went on, speaking into the mic that Jericho held to his lips. "You brought me light that I didn't even know existed. You loved a broken man and made me want to do better. I am so in love with you, Violet. I want to spend my life loving you.

I want to fulfill God's perfect will for me and I know He wants me to do that by loving and protecting and caring for you. By creating a family with you. Violet, will you make me happy beyond my wildest dreams and marry me?"

The entire place was silent.

Violet smiled sweetly. "Yes, of course I will, CJ. I love you so much."

He took the ring out, handed the box to Jericho and slid the ring onto Violet's finger. He then rose, took her in his arms and kissed her. The crowd at Joe's cheered and applauded loudly. So did the crowd in the Ameritech training room.

Gabe was grinning from ear to ear as some guys slapped him on the back and rubbed his head.

"How's that make you feel, Tanner?"

He smiled as he paused the livestream. "Really happy. CJ is an awesome guy and Violet has had some hard times and so, I'm so happy for her. And it's always cool to have an Ameritech agent for a brother-in-law."

"Is he your first brother-in-law?"

Gabe shook his head, stood and went to the screen. "That guy right there is the first. He's engaged to my eldest sister, who is right there. She's twenty-five. Her name is Heather."

"Another looker."

Gabe smiled. "Yeah she is. She's really sweet." He pointed to Daisy. "That's Daisy. She also has a twin. Daisy is twenty-three."

"Oh, she's my age. Is she taken?" an agent from Black team asked.

"Actually, she has a boyfriend. You might know about him. Brody Smith. He's Toby Nash's son. He plays baseball for Tennessee right now, and is the number one ranked player in the country."

"Hey," another said. "I follow him. He's good."

"You said Daisy has a twin. Is she there?"

Gabe searched the screen. "Yeah, that's her. Her name is Lily."

"Is she available?"

Gabe chuckled. "I think she just met someone that she's interested in. I think that's him right there." Gabe pointed to the screen.

"Anymore sisters?"

Gabe chuckled. "Yeah. But I'll have to show you pics off my phone because they're not there."

"I'm gonna hold you to it."

Gabe nodded. "Okay then, let's continue and see if there's anything else to see. Play," he said loudly.

They watched as everyone congratulated CJ and hugged Violet.

Rose went up on the platform to do the same and then turned to Jericho. "So, this I why you didn't want me to be late."

He smiled. "It was part of the reason. Stand right there a minute while I finish this up." He put the microphone to his mouth. "Hey everyone. So, that was totally cool. Let's give them a hand."

He waited while everyone clapped again.

"Now, *I* have something to share with you."

They all quieted.

"I went a different road than CJ, my dear friend, whom I love like a brother. I had big goals. I wanted to do big things. I worked hard and focused on that goal for the past ten years. My football hopes and dreams were over. Done. But I couldn't let that get me down. My rehab after the fire took a while and led me down the road to become a firefighter. I didn't want to be just any old firefighter. I wanted to be the best. Then I wanted to be the best at every single kind of rescue I could be; hazmat, shipboard, wildland, airport, aircraft, SCUBA, mountain, caves, floods, explosives, urban, even in combat, you name it, I wanted to excel in it. I trained or worked every hour of the day for many years. I learned to jump from planes. I learned to deal with wild animals. I learned all I could. I got good at what I did. I wanted to share my knowledge and that's why I started my little company. And these guys, my five guys, they are the best. Hotshots for sure.

"It sounds like I'm boasting but I'm not. I am however, confident in what I do. In what we do. You have to be confident in order to be affective. Why am I telling you all this? Because in all this time, I never met a girl, a woman, who was strong enough to be my partner. Not until I came to Pine Forest, Georgia and met the strongest woman I know. Rose Tanner."

Rose's eyes opened wide.

Jericho turned to smile at her. "I met Rose when she was about to climb a sixty foot ladder. Fearlessly climb, I might add. The wind was blowing pretty hard that day and it started to blow the ladder over and I ran to help her. That's how I met her. Since then I've watched this beautiful, brilliantly smart, driven young lady conquer the world. How could I not fall madly in love? She stole my heart. Completely. And then, I got hurt when that deck collapsed, as some of you know. I almost died. So what happens when you almost die? You regret not telling people that you love them."

He glanced at Rose who was using her pinky to wipe at some moisture in her eyes. His smile widened.

"So, I told her when I was in the hospital, and lucky me, she responded in kind. All I could think about since then was getting well, getting back on my feet, so I could stand up like a man when I asked her to marry me. Well, the wheelchair is gone. The crutches are gone. The boot is gone. I'm back on my feet in more ways than one." He nodded at CJ who came and took the mic for him.

Jericho pulled a velvet box from his pocket and knelt down on one knee, opened the box and looked up into her sparkling blue eyes.

Rose bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

"RoseRose," he said with smile. "I think I fell in love with you the minute I laid eyes on you. Since then, every single time I see you, my heart grows, it yearns to be with you always and forever. I want to be your husband, I want to provide for you, protect you, and worship God with you. I want to make a family with you, baby. I want to love you forever. I want to make you my wife. And so, RoseRose, will you do me the honor

of marrying me?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, Jericho Jones. I will."

He put the ring on her finger. Kissed her and the crowd again went wild. Women rushed the stage. Everyone congratulated Jericho.

Finally, Melaynah turned the camera to herself. "Well everyone, there you have it. A double engagement. Rose and Violet have been my amazing neighbors and friends my whole life and I'm so happy for them! One of the reasons we livestreamed this event is because our own Gabe Tanner is training right now in California and we got special permission to broadcast so that he could see his sisters getting engaged. I hope we did you proud, Gabe. We all love you and miss you here. You too, Taylor. Also, my parents and Gabe's parents are watching from home because they have tiny babies and Gabe's sister Iris is not feeling well, so we're glad they could see this as well. We love you all. Gabe will be on here tomorrow morning. See you then. Signing off from Pine Forest, Georgia. Bye!"

✝✝✝

At the Tanner home, five young ladies all sat down at the kitchen table, after Rose and Violet had been hugged and kissed and congratulated by their mother and father. Iris and the babies were upstairs asleep, and of course Gabe was absent.

Rose sighed. "I wish you guys could've been there."

"We saw it all," Lizzy said. "Up close and personal! Even if Iris wasn't sick, I wouldn't have drug the babies out. I'm sorry, girls that I wasn't there for your special night."

"It's okay, Mom," Violet said. "Rose and I are okay. We're just sad for you because you couldn't be there."

"Like I said, we saw the whole thing."

Rose nodded. "I'm sorry if it sounded like I was complaining. I really was just thinking about you."

"Thank you, ladies," Keegan said. "Your mom and I were watching and we couldn't be more thankful that we wholeheartedly approve of our new soon-to-be sons-in-laws."

Lizzy nodded. "Oh, my baby girls. I can't believe you're all grown up and getting married, and I have to echo what your dad said. I mean, you could've chosen some horrible guy, but instead you both chose good men who love God and love each of you. I watch how they are with you. They are smitten."

Daisy sighed. "Well, Dad is making it easy on us to make the right choice."

"What do you mean?" Lizzy asked.

She shrugged. "We just look for a guy who reminds us of our father. If he doesn't measure up, he's out."

The girls all nodded.

"Then, does Brody remind you of Dad?" Violet asked her sister.

Daisy smiled. "So much. I know we haven't been a couple for very long and I don't want to jinx it, but I could see myself with Brody forever."

"We don't believe in jinxes," Rose said quickly. "Because we have God on our side

and if God wants you together and you want to be together, nothing can stand in the way."

Daisy smiled.

"What about you, Lily?" Rose said.

Lily's eyebrows rose. "What about me?"

"Does Justice measure up?"

Lily smiled and sighed. "He does indeed, but it's waaay too early to be talking that way, even to be thinking that way."

Rose shrugged. "When you know, you know."

Keegan smiled. "Those are the words CJ said when he came to ask me for your hand, Vi."

Violet smiled. "So, when did he come and ask you?"

"Last week. He asked to speak with both your mom and I, which I found to be very nice, instead of speaking just to me. He understood the importance of what this would mean to your mother. And he told her he had great respect for her and was interested in her thoughts."

"Nice," Rose said.

Keegan smiled. "And I don't know if Jericho and CJ spoke about it, but Jericho did the same thing."

"Cool. So, like, how did he approach you?" Rose asked.

"He called and asked if he could come and speak to your mother and I last Monday morning, a week ago. He told me how the plans Ameritech had for his company were so perfect and why they were so perfect for you because you didn't want to leave Pine Forest. He said he knew you would leave though, if he asked you to, because you were such a good woman of God who would go where her husband goes, but he was so stoked that you wouldn't have to. He spoke of his love for you, of your strength and promised to always protect you, take care of you, and never do anything to diminish you in any way."

Heather sighed. "That is so beautiful."

Lizzy nodded. "It was lovely. And CJ, not surprisingly, pretty much said the same things."

Heather frowned. "So, Dad, Mom, when Nolan and I called you on a joint call, like, did that upset you? I hope you don't think we were being disrespectful."

"Not at all," Keegan said. "Nolan didn't know us like CJ and Jericho know us. And he didn't really propose to you. You called me together to tell me that you'd been talking about marriage. And then the next time he was in town, you both came to me for my blessing. It unfolded organically. I see no disrespect."

"But he didn't talk to both of you together," Heather said.

Lizzy smiled. "He actually spoke to me before he spoke to your father. He was nervous about speaking to your dad. I think he wanted to know if I approved, because if I did, then he was sure your father would approve."

"Smart," Rose said with a nod.

"What did he say to you exactly?" Heather asked.

"Hmm, he said, um, Mrs. Tanner, um, do you have a minute to um, like, speak to me? It's about um, Heather."

Heather laughed. "He did not. He doesn't talk like some teen boy."

Lizzy laughed. "Okay, so, I was exaggerating. He said, 'Mrs. Tanner, I suppose you already realize that I love your daughter very much and Heather loves me and I'm so grateful for that and I want to go to Mr. Tanner and ask for her hand in marriage and I know we've already told you both that we'd like to get married, but I wanted to make sure it's okay with you before we make it official. And the thing is, I'm not quite sure how to approach Mr. Tanner.' And then I told him the only way to approach him is directly, in honesty, and bravely, like a man would approach another man, and speak up and speak clearly. And then I eased his fear and told him not to worry because Keegan already likes him. That wasn't the whole conversation, but that's how it went."

"And then," Keegan began, "he came to me and told me how he makes a good living as a veterinarian, and will one day inherit his father's ranch, and he feels like he can support you decently. And I asked him if he would discuss things with me because I have vast resources and could help them with any plans they have." Keegan smiled. "I think that surprised him. I think he wasn't used to having a man let him know he was willing to step in and help him with a tough decision."

Heather nodded. "Yeah, his father is pretty hands off when it comes to helping to teach Nolan. He believes Nolan should work things out on his own. Unless he wants to change how his father does things on the ranch. Then, he doesn't want Nolan to have any input. No new ideas. Period."

Keegan nodded. "Forgive him, sweetheart. Sometimes, in our effort to make our children into responsible adults, we make mistakes. We forget that we have to take time to teach them first. Teach them with love in our hearts. Then, we gently let go. We stop running next to the bike and let go. Sometimes they ride away. Sometimes they fall and need more instruction."

"Well that's a lovely notion, Dad," Heather said. "But Mr. Sawyer is very harsh. Very mean. And he sure doesn't like me very much. So, I will try to forgive him, but I refuse to let him drive me away from Nolan, because I love him so much, Dad. Nolan is just like you."

Lizzy smiled. "You be strong, sweetie. If he's like your dad, then he deserves your love."

Keegan frowned as he zeroed in on something she said. "Tell me Heather, how do you know that Mr. Sawyer doesn't like you?"

"Uh, oh," Rose said. "You know you shouldn't have opened that can of worms, sis."

They all laughed.

Heather sighed. "Nolan told me that he told you that his father wasn't very impressed with my views on raising cattle with humane practices. And keeping our food sources pure. He scowls at me whenever I open my mouth. Which around him isn't often."

Keegan's eyes narrowed.

"Um, well isn't it a good thing that Heather and Nolan have moved down here?" Lizzy said quickly. "We won't have to worry about all of that."

"When they come down for Heather's wedding, I hope you don't start up with him, Dad," Lily said softly.

Keegan smiled. "I know you don't like confrontation, Lily, and I wouldn't dream of ruining my daughter's wedding day— as long as Sawyer doesn't. We're all grown ups. I think we can get along for a few days without making a spectacle of ourselves."

Rose giggled. "Okay then. This should be fun!"

✝✝✝

January 21st 2:00 AM PST Tuesday Morning

Davis Home, Huntington Beach, California

Zoe woke at the sound of Brook whimpering. Easing out of bed, she padded across the room to Brook's bed and put her hand on her shoulder.

"Brook, wake up."

Brook startled and opened her eyes. "What's goin' on?"

"I think you were having a nightmare or something."

Brook rubbed her eyes and sat up. "Did I yell or somethin'?"

"No. Just like, crying a little bit. What were you dreaming?"

Brook sighed. "Something about Darrin. I think it was about the night he came to my room. It's not really clear."

Zoe frowned as she thought about what Brook's step-father did to her. "So, you okay, or you want me to stay with you?"

Brook smiled. "Stay."

Zoe grinned and got into bed with her friend. They'd shared many nights huddled together when they were living on the streets. They'd gravitated to each other and become a team. Then, when some guys were trying to mess with them, Ryder came along and took care of that problem. He decided to stay with them in case the guys came back. He became their protector and their provider. Their big brother. He happened to be in a place where some do-gooders had been handing out blankets and tents and he'd procured one for them. They'd spent nights in that tent, all huddled together. Zoe was grateful for Ryder in so many ways. With him around, she and Brook had actually been able to sleep without fear. That was a luxury most people never even think about, not having to stay alert for fear of someone deciding to grab you.

She smiled. And here she was, snug in a warm, soft bed, feeling completely safe. It was heaven and she would never take that for granted again. Not ever.

"What are you thinking about?" Brook asked.

"I guess I was just thinking about how nice it is to be safe and warm and comfortable in this bed."

Brook smiled. "It is nice. Especially the 'safe' part. When Mr. Davis is home especially. It's like, I immediately relax."

"Me too. I hope one day I meet a guy like him."

"Me too," Brook said. "And I hope he's cute like him too."

Zoe giggled. "Yeah, Mr. Davis is cute. Have you gotten any further reading Mrs.

Davis' book yet?"

"Yeah, but only a little. I'm only on chapter two. How far are you?"

"I'm about halfway through. I wish you'd hurry and catch up so we can talk about what's happening. You've had the book a lot longer than me."

"I'm sorry, but I've been so busy."

Zoe rolled her eyes. "You're not even goin' to school."

"Yeah, but the online school, I think it's harder than regular school."

Zoe shrugged. "Well, anyway, hurry up and catch up. I'll just warn you, it's so crazy what Mrs. Davis went through. I feel so sorry for her. The title, '*Mom Married a Monster*,' is so perfect. But wait until you get to about, I think it's chapter six. You're not gonna believe what happened."

"Tell me."

"It'll spoil it for you."

"I actually like spoilers, because then I don't have to worry about what's gonna happen."

Zoe laughed and then shrugged. "Okay, well, so, Mrs. Davis was kidnapped and held hostage by these two men. It was Mr. Davis who found her. That's how they met."

"Oh, that's cool."

"It is so cool. It's actually really romantic and you know it takes a lot for me to say something stupid like that."

Brook giggled. She sighed and lay quietly a minute. "So, like, how are ya likin' school over there at Oceanside?"

"It's good so far. No one has messed with me. I've made a few friends. It all seems to be good. It helps that Phillip and Lyle Keith go there, and they sort of look out for me. And Mika Burton, the girl at church who sings so good, she's in one of my classes and she's nice to me. So, really, it's not too bad so far."

"Good. I'm happy for you, Zoe."

"I'm happy for me too."

Brook smiled. "So, whaddya think about the Davis' new house?"

"Well, it's really big and it's really pretty and I'm really glad that we don't have to change schools, so, I think it's cool. And I know Mrs. Davis is happy about it and like, excited and stuff."

Brook nodded. "It's really fancy. I heard her talking. It's like, several million dollars. It has six thousand square feet. I don't know that much about buying houses, but Darrin, ugh, I hate saying his name, but like, he knows about houses, and he always said that over four thousand square feet is a big deal in this area, and that only very rich people can afford it."

Zoe nodded. "Yeah, well, the Davis' don't act like they're rich but they are. Mrs. Davis' books have been number one on the New York Times bestseller list. They got money. Millions. And Mr. Davis makes good money, cuz I heard him talkin' to the Kinos about investments and stuff."

"How do you hear all this stuff?" Brook asked.

Zoe shrugged. "I listen. Just be quiet and listen. It's a good thing to do. That's how

I stayed alive."

Brook smiled. "You're so smart, Zoe."

Zoe giggled. "Street smart, yeah."

"Ya know, we kind of look alike," Brook said.

Zoe frowned. "Well, we both have blond hair."

"Daniel and Jeremy say we look like sisters."

Zoe looked into Brook's face as they lay on their sides facing each other. "I guess you're right. We do sort of look like sisters."

"JoJo and Logan and young Eric and Gabe Tanner all say that they're brothers," Brook went on. "And they all come from different parents. Why don't we just say we're sisters?"

Zoe smiled. "Would you like that, Brook?"

Brook smiled. "I would really like that."

"Okay, then, sis. We're sisters. From now on, from this moment forward, you and I are sisters. So, that means we can share clothes and you, sister, can come to me about anything."

Brook nodded. "And you can come to me."

Zoe smiled. "Cool." She sighed. "So, what are you gonna do tomorrow while I'm at school slaving away."

"Mrs. Davis and me and Scarlett are going over to check on Mrs. Bell and Callie and Ellie, and make sure they're doing okay and then we're heading over to visit with Desi and make sure she doesn't need anything, cuz, like, she could go into labor anytime now."

"I wonder if she's scared," Zoe whispered.

"I don't know if she is, but I know I am."

Zoe reached out and touched Brook's face. "Don't be scared, Brook. I think you're brave. I'm so proud of you for like, not killing the baby. That takes a lot of courage. But don't be scared because I heard Dr. Jeffy say she's gonna take good care of you and keep you from having any pain."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. So don't be scared."

"And you're proud of me?"

"Yeah, I really am. There's not a lot of girls who would do what you're doing. They would hate the baby."

Brook shrugged. "It's not the baby's fault that her daddy is a jerk."

Zoe giggled. "You're right. And I've been watching a bunch of videos lately, of grown up people who are the like, the children of rape, and they're all so grateful to be alive. They're glad they weren't aborted."

Brook smiled. "That's cool. Send me the videos. I want to see them."

"I will. Remind me in the morning."

"Okay. Well, I'm getting sleepy now."

"Me too."

"Goodnight, Zoe."

"Good night, sis."

Brook smiled.

✝✝✝

January 21st 7 AM Tuesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric and Shelley Kino and five little ones made their way upstairs from the weapons room, where they have their morning routine when it's too rainy or cold to workout on the beach. Today, it was raining.

They stretched. They went through some forms with the children. They worked on different kicks. They prayed together and headed upstairs to have some breakfast. The children took their seats around the table just as Jeffy came downstairs and headed to the kitchen with Elijah.

Shelley greeted the baby by kissing both his fat cheeks loudly, making him smile and giggle. "Oh, give me some kisses," she said as she nuzzled him. "You're just getting so fat and healthy, aren't ya, big boy. Your momma makes some good milk, huh? Yes she does!"

Jeffy smiled. "Well, he actually didn't nurse very well this morning. I think he misses his daddy."

Shelley made a face. "He should be back tomorrow, right?"

Jeffy nodded. "I think it could be as early as tonight, but I think that's wishful thinking on my part."

"Who's coming here?" Noah asked.

"Uncle Cam," Jeffy said.

Noah shook his head. "No. Who's coming heeere?"

Eric turned his attention to his son. "Whatcha mean, Noah?"

Noah shrugged.

"He means who is dat man?" Abraham answered.

Eric looked around. "Hmm, I wonder what they're picking up on."

Jeffy closed her eyes. "Oh, someone's here."

At the same time Eric's phone buzzed. He answered and put it on speaker and put his finger to his lips to tell the children to be silent.

"Good morning, Agent Martinez," Eric said.

"Good morning, sir. So, I know you have no appointments, but you have a visitor here, sir. He apologizes that it's so early. He arrived this morning, from Scotland on an early flight. He is an elderly gentleman. He had a limousine bring him directly here from the airport."

"Name?"

"Well, that is the question of the day. He says he doesn't want to give his name until he is with you face to face, but he says the Lord told him to give you a fraction and you would allow him entrance."

"A fraction? As in a mathematical expression?"

"Yes sir."

"Okay, I'll bite. What is the fraction?"

"It's one twelfth, sir. One over twelve."

Eric's eyes opened wide. Jeffy nodded. Shelley grinned.

Eric cleared his throat. "Well, Agent Martinez, he is absolutely correct. That will get him in. Send him up."

"Um, sir, forgive me, but I'd feel much better if you'd allow me to lead him up there myself and observe him as he exits the limo. Maybe even pat him down."

Eric nodded. "I understand, Agent. If it makes you feel better, then please lead him up here and stand by. I'll meet you outside."

"Thank you, sir. We'll be right there."

Eric smiled at the children. "Everyone stay in your seats. Do not get up from the table, understood?"

"Yes sir," they all said softly, disappointment in their voices.

Eric smiled. "Shelley, would you mind taking Eli so that Jeffy can accompany me and make sure there are no weapons so that we won't have to pat down an elderly gentleman?"

"Yes, of course," Shelley replied.

"Are you getting a name?" Eric asked Jeffy.

Jeffy shook her head. "No sir. No name, but a feeling of light and goodness and, um, the Holy Spirit."

Eric smiled. They went to the front door and stepped out onto the porch. The rain was down to a drizzling mist. They watched as Agent Martinez drove a black SUV up the drive, leading the limousine to the front walk. The limo came to a halt. Eric and Jeffy headed down the steps.

Agent Martinez waved away the driver. "I'll get his door." He opened the back passenger-side door of the limo and offered his hand. "May I help you, sir?"

The man nodded with a smile and allowed the agent to take his hand and pull him from the vehicle.

Eric watched. The man was tall. Maybe about as tall as young Eric, so about 6'2" or more. He looked strong enough. Not fragile looking like Reverend Clark. He stood up straight and had a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes. His face was quite wrinkled, but he had a head full of white hair, longish, as it curled around behind his ears. He had a full white beard. He wore slacks in tartan colors of red, black and yellow, a white shirt and a black sweater vest.

Eric gave a questioning look at Jeffy. She smiled. "All good."

Agent Martinez started forward, but Eric spoke to him in Spanish. "It's okay, Agent, Jeffy scanned him and there are no weapons."

The agent nodded and stood back.

Eric moved down the steps and approached the man with a smile. "Hello, sir. I'm Eric Kino." He held out his hand.

The older man took his hand and smiled broadly. "Grandmaster Kino. It's such a pleasure to meet you in person."

"I'd like to say the same."

The man nodded and glanced at Jeffy. "Well, most of my friends call me Billy, but

before I disclose any more, I'd like to do it in private."

Eric sighed and nodded. "Very well then, as you wish. Billy, this is my daughter, June Flower."

Jeffy offered a smile and her hand to Billy.

The man smiled broadly. "Ah, yes, the famous Dr. Kino Wallace! It's a great pleasure to meet you!"

Jeffy smiled and nodded. "You as well." She couldn't really read him other than he was filled with God's light.

He patted her hand before he let it go. "Such a bonny lass."

Jeffy smiled. "Thank you, sir."

"Please come inside," Eric said. "Do you have luggage?"

"I do."

"Then, will you stay with us?"

"Thank you for the offer. I will be happy to indeed."

Eric nodded. "Wonderful. I'll grab your luggage." He started to ask the driver to raise the trunk, but was interrupted.

"I'll get it, sir," Agent Martinez said quickly.

"Thank you, Agent. If you'll run the luggage up to the landing at the top of the stairs, I'll have to ask my wife which room later."

The Agent gave a slight bow. "Of course, sir."

Eric turned back to the older man. "Please, Billy, come inside." He offered his arm. The man took it, but seemed to make it up the steps with no problem. Jeffy brought up the rear.

Eric sighed. "You'll have to forgive my attire. Our family just finished our morning martial arts routine when you arrived."

"I apologize for not making an appointment. It was a last minute decision to come, a very strong urging from the Lord, and I simply packed some bags and headed to the airport. I really had no idea how to go about reaching you."

"No apology necessary. I am very intrigued. So, my wife is with the children, feeding them breakfast and we have some other guests staying with us, though they haven't made an appearance this morning."

I would so love to meet your family," Billy replied.

Eric nodded and led him through the front door.

Billy stopped and looked around at the giant entry foyer. To his right there was a sweeping curved staircase that led to a balcony upstairs. The foyer had bright marble floors, a crystal chandelier, a large mirror, and a beautiful painting of a lush green lawn with a colossal oak tree in the center. Billy looked closely at the painting. "My, this is magnificent."

Eric smiled. "I agree. This was painted by Breez Adams, my daughter-in-law who is married to my son Joey. It was her Christmas gift to me. It's a representation of an experience I had on the other side, when I died this past August. She captured it quite well."

Billy nodded. "It looks so inviting, like I just want to climb up into the tree. It

makes me feel like I'm a little boy again."

Eric smiled. "I definitely would love to go there again."

Billy continued to look around. To the left was a gigantic room that held three sofas, a loveseat, antique tables, beautiful lamps, and a large cabinet against the far wall. Way back in the far right corner of the room was a set of three steps, about fifteen feet wide, that led up to another large room where he could see part of an enormous table. He smiled. "Lovely. Just lovely."

"Thank you," Eric said. He led Billy straight back, down a wide corridor toward the back of the house. He gestured toward a hallway to the right. "That leads to my study, a den, a playroom for the little ones, and a suite of rooms where our current guests are staying."

He didn't stop, but continued on until they got to a giant kitchen. Jeffy headed immediately to retrieve Eli from his carrier. Shelley turned and smiled. She had a plate in each hand and one on her forearm. "Hello! Hold on just a second and let me set these down."

Eric immediately took two of them from her and set them in front of Nate and Noah. Shelley set the last one in front of Manny. "Children, don't eat yet. We have a guest." She turned with a smile and offered her hand to the elderly man.

"Billy, this is my lovely wife, Shelley. Shelley this is Billy. That's all we know yet."

Billy smiled and took Shelley's hand. "Mrs. Kino, how lovely to meet you. My oh my, you are another bonny lass."

Eric smiled at Shelley's blush. "And these are our five youngest children. Angelina, Abraham, Noah, Emmanuel, and Nathaniel."

Each child raised their hands as Eric called their names.

"What an amazing group of weans. It's an honor to meet you."

"What do you say children?" Eric coached.

"It's nice to meet you," they said in unison.

"You forgot a word. Try again."

"It's nice to meet you, SIR," they said.

Eric smiled. "Very good." He turned to Billy. "We've been practicing because they are introduced to so many people."

Billy nodded. "Well, that was a fine job." He glanced at the baby in Jeffy's arms. "And who might this wee bairn be?"

Jeffy smiled. "This little guy is Elijah." She held the baby out for him to see his sweet face.

"Oh my," Billy said, and appeared to become emotional. "I'm in awe. Such a new one." He looked closely at the baby. "Ach, you have a strong warrior spirit indeed, young Elijah."

Eric watched this show of emotion and wasn't sure what to think.

"Mr. Billy, may I get you some breakfast?" Shelley asked.

"That won't be necessary. I was served a meal on the flight. However, would you happen to have some tea?"

Shelley nodded. “Well, we have lots of teas. You’re probably talking about a morning tea, so that would be a black tea?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I do have some.”

“Wonderful. With some milk and sugar if you don’t mind, Mrs. Kino.”

“I don’t mind a bit. I’m happy to get it for you. But please, you must call me Shelley.”

He smiled and nodded. “Shelley it is, ma’am.”

Eric turned to the man. “So, Billy, while you have some tea, I’ll run upstairs and change and then maybe you would like to come to my study and we can have that face to face discussion?”

“I would love to do that,” Billy said brightly.

✝✝✝

January 21st 7:30 AM PST Tuesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove California

Jeffy watched her father and the elderly man, Billy, head into her father’s study. She was very curious about the man because she’d tried to read him but was getting nothing. That hardly ever happens. Who was this man? Still, she sensed only goodness and light and peace and perhaps a bit of sadness.

“Interesting, huh?” Shelley asked her daughter.

Jeffy nodded. “I can’t wait to hear what Dad finds out.”

“Me too,” Shelley said. “But God gave him one twelfth, so, that must mean he’s one of the twelve.”

“What else could it mean?” Jeffy quipped with a nod. She held Eli up to stand in her lap. “Huh, Elijah boy, huh? What else could it mean, huh?”

Elijah graced then with a smile, making both women laugh and making the kids at the table start trying to also make him smile.

At that moment Melody arrived, coming in through the kitchen door. “Good morning everyone,” Melody chirped sweetly.

“Melody,” the children all greeted.

“Good morning, Miss Shelley,” Melody said warmly. “Hey Dr. Kino,” Melody said.

“Good morning,” both Jeffy and her mom said brightly.

“Melody, what will it take to get you to call me Aunt Jeffy?”

Melody grinned. “Uumm, honestly?”

Jeffy nodded. “Always.”

Melody shrugged. “Well, I guess it would take a marriage proposal.” Her face immediately turned pink.

Jeffy burst out laughing. “Ow wow, Melody, well then, you really were being honest, weren’t you!”

“I can’t believe I actually said that. Please don’t tell Logan.”

“Our lips are sealed,” Shelley said. “And don’t you worry, sweet girl, I’m pretty sure it’s coming. He probably wants to see what happens this spring when his album

drops."

Melody frowned. "It shouldn't depend on that, right? I mean, if he loves me and I love him, then we should get married even if the album is a big flub, right?"

Shelly smiled. "Right. But it's not gonna flub, and he's probably pretty sure it's not gonna flub, and I'm sure he wants some concrete success to present to your father when he goes to ask for your hand."

"Oh," Melody said softly. "I hadn't thought about that."

Shelley nodded. "The guys, they actually have a lot of responsibility to handle. They have to think ahead on how they need to handle things like that. So, let's give Logan a break. I know he's totally in love with you and working feverishly to make sure he's worthy to take care of you."

"Wow, Mrs. Kino, when you put it that way, it makes me want to take the pressure off of him."

Jeffy giggled. "And that, sweet Melody, just shows that you truly love him. I'm so excited to watch you two. Love is beautiful."

Melody smiled.

Jeffy looked down at her phone on the table when it buzzed. "Oh, Mom, it's the Okellos. I have to take this." She scooped up her phone. "Hello!"

"Hello, Dr. Kino," Moreen Okello said brightly.

"Moreen, it's so nice to hear from you. Is everything okay? You ARE still coming right, because I wanted you guys to meet our little Elijah."

"Oh, yes, we are coming. Balon and Sanyu would never let me hear the end of it if we didn't come. But I do have a favor to ask of you and a little story to tell you that I think you'll find very exciting."

"Okay, hold on a minute." Jeffy turned to Shelley. "Mom, I'm gonna go upstairs so I can hear."

"I'll take Eli," Shelley said, "since Melody's here."

Jeffy handed off the baby and headed upstairs. Moreen Okello, who in Uganda was called Okello Moreen, was the wife of Dr. Okello John. The two of them took in Jeffy's bodyguard, Hart Akins, when Jeffy had been in Africa four years ago. Hart had been shot and they nursed him back to health. They'd also taken care of Balon and Sanyu after Jeffy's medical camp had been brutally attacked and the children's mother and twin unborn siblings had just died. Since then, the Okellos and their now adopted children, Balondemu and Sanyu, had come to the states yearly to visit Jeffy and Cam.

"Okay, Moreen, tell me something exciting."

"Well, Dr. Kino, we've met a man. A very interesting man. His name is Musani Andrew. He has quite a story, but I'll give you a short version of it."

"Okay, I'm all ears."

Moreen giggled. "I just love the funny American sayings."

Jeffy laughed.

"Andrew was born in Uganda. When he grew up he traveled all over the countryside with his tattered old Bible and taught everyone who would listen about our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

"Well that is wonderful."

"Oh, yes. He is a wonderful man. But he has had some very hard times. His travels took him out of the country through northern Kenya. There he met a beautiful girl whom he loved very much. She had a beautiful voice and she would sing with him. She too loved the Lord. They married and had four children. Together they ran a little church in Kenya. They didn't have a lot of money, but Andrew was so very happy. He continued to teach as many people as possible about Jesus. But a terrorist group from Somalia, al-Shabaab, came through their little town. In short, Dr. Kino, they raided the little church. They killed several members of the church including Andrew's wife and four children. They thought they'd killed Andrew too, and left him for dead, but he survived."

Jeffy's eyes filled and she sniffed back the tears.

"Much to everyone's surprise, Andrew did not allow himself to be swept up in his despair. He said he knew his family was waiting for him in heaven and when he saw them, he didn't want to tell them that he gave up and gave into his despair and stopped teaching the world about Jesus. So, after he finished with his mourning, he took what little possessions he had and continued his travels with his old Bible, teaching everyone he came in contact with for many years. He ended up in Ethiopia. There was much trouble there and civil unrest. Andrew got caught up in one battle and was taken and imprisoned. He remained in that prison for the past ten years. Sleeping on the stone floor at night and doing slave work during the day. He was getting old and he says he longed for God to bring him home.

"Then one day, something amazing happened. He was asleep and he heard a voice say, 'Andrew, wake up.' He opened his eyes and saw that the cell door was open. He looked around, thinking it was a trap. He thought maybe he would go out the door and would be shot. So, he grabbed his Bible and moved near the door and peered out. He stood there for almost an hour. Finally, he took a step out the door. Nothing happened. He took another, and another, and another. That night he walked twenty miles. He came upon the Omo river at dawn, drank some water, crawled into some brush and fell asleep. When he woke there was something wrapped in a cloth by his side. He opened the cloth and found some injera, which is a type of bread. You probably remember it from when you were here."

"I do," Jeffy answered.

"Well, Andrew ate, drank some water and continued on his journey. As he walked he said he thanked and praised God with every breath. He followed the river until he was sure he crossed the boundary into Kenya at Lake Turkana. Each day he came across something to eat. Fish, bread, sweets, fruit. He passed through his old village where he lost his family, paid respects and headed back to the home of his birth, Uganda. When he came across people he would tell of his travels and teach about Jesus. He never stopped teaching about Jesus.

"Dr. Kino, last week I went into the market and came across this man. I was there to place a book to lend on the lending table. The book I was placing was your father's

memoirs. Andrew saw me put the book on the table and asked me about it. I told him it was an incredible story of a man who saw an angel when he was a boy of ten and Andrew actually began to cry. He said over and over, 'I am not alone. I am not alone. I know God is with me, but I am not alone in my human life.' I didn't know what he was talking about. Then he told me that he too saw an angel when he was a boy of ten, when he was lost in the Bwindi National Forest. He asked me if he could read the book. I told him it was in English and he said he read English very well. He explained the Bible he carried was written in English.

"I told him I would let him read it if he would come to our home and eat and bathe and rest. He laughed and told me I don't drive a very difficult bargain. I took him home and he met my husband and the children. That was two weeks ago. Dr. Kino, you told me when we spoke about the book the other day that your father believes there are twelve men who have had a similar experience. I didn't say anything then, but I believe Mr. Musani Andrew is one of them and I would like him to come with us when we come to America, so that he can meet your father. So, the favor I wanted to ask is can he travel with us when we come there, and can you arrange to get his passport within only a few days?"

Jeffy sighed. "Hmm, I'll need to get Uncle Justin or Mark involved and I'll need to get right on it. I want to talk more to you, Moreen, because I'm so intrigued, but let me start the ball rolling on this matter and get back to you. I'm gonna need some information from Mr. Musani. Is he available?"

"Yes, he's right here listening to this conversation."

Jeffy smiled. "Mr. Musani?"

Jeffy heard, "She can hear you, go ahead and speak."

"Oh, yes Dr. Kino! I'm so happy to be talking to the daughter of Grandmaster Eric Kino."

Jeffy felt the Holy Spirit move through her at his voice. "Well, I'm so happy to be speaking to such a strong and amazing man of God."

"Not that amazing I'm afraid."

Jeffy smiled. "Listen, God opened your cell door, He led you on a journey and fed you on the way. So, it seems to me, Mr. Musani, that you are as important to Him as the children of Israel."

The man chuckled. "That is a most beautiful thought. Hopefully, I am more faithful than them."

Jeffy smiled. "Truly. Mr. Musani, allow me to get your information and get to work on your passport and then we'll be able to talk some more."

"Do you think it will be possible then, for me to come?"

"Absolutely."

"I can't tell you how thrilled I am. I feel like jumping for joy."

"Me too. And I can't wait to tell my father about you."

✝✝✝

Isaiah 43:16-19

"Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,

who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

Chapter Eighteen

At the same time....

As Eric and Billy headed into Eric's study, Billy looked Eric over. The man took a seat behind the desk. Eric had quickly showered and donned some black slacks and white shirt. His thick, long, dark hair was loose and fell neatly around his shoulders. Billy nodded. "You seem to be a fine specimen of man," Billy commented.

Eric's eyebrows rose.

"Forgive an old man his loose words. Sometimes I blurt out what I'm thinking. I know you are seventy-years-old, correct? And I have to say you don't show your age at all. You look young and very fit. You have only a few strands of gray in your hair."

Eric nodded. "The regimen I've been on since a kid, with the healthy, pure foods, and my daughter's protocols, seems to really help maintain a healthy, youthful body."

Billy nodded. "It is remarkable."

Eric smiled. "And so, Billy, you say the Lord told you to give me a fraction. One-twelfth. Which to me translates to one of the twelve, which is significant to me. Is it to you?"

Billy nodded. "I understand that it must be significant. What exactly it means, I'm not sure. I just know that the good Lord told me to say those words at the gate." He shrugged and grinned. "Now sir, let's get to it. I've read your story, Eric. It is an amazing story and you are a lovely man. And I have a similar story."

Eric nodded. "Will you share it with me?"

"I will. And afterward, I'll tell you my name and who I really am."

Eric nodded. "May I record you? I've recorded a few now. I've found there are several others with the same story and we've decided to write up everyone's accounting and recording it really helps. Afterward, it will be transcribed."

Billy nodded. "Yes, of course."

Eric hit a button on his phone. "Record. This is a man named Billy, whose last name I will eventually learn. Go ahead Billy."

Billy smiled. "I was born in Scotland. I was the sixth and last child of my parents and the only boy."

Eric smiled. "I bet that was fun."

"Yeah, not so much. I longed for a brother. My sisters were strong-willed and not what you would call sweet lasses. I spent a lot of time alone whenever possible. At school, it seemed I was always getting into trouble, and that was mostly because my sisters would tell on me. Sometimes what they told was true. Other times, they fabricated what was told just for their own entertainment I suppose. I got the tawse as a regular thing."

"The tawse?"

"A leather strap."

Eric nodded.

"My family was not poor. We were landowners, though no one would consider our way of life lavish. For sure I didn't get coddled because of our wealth. It seemed the opposite. My father wouldn't listen to my complaints because he didn't want me to be coddled. I think he feared with so many sisters I'd grow up to be a sissy. That was hardly the case, as my sisters were a force to be reckoned with." He stopped and smiled.

"I'm not complaining. I just want you to understand my frame of mind. I was pretty much a miserable lad. My backside was always black and blue, either from my father or the headmaster of the school. I felt misunderstood. I felt there was no justice in the world. I felt trapped. My family was prominent in the local church, which was the Church of Scotland, which is a Presbyterian type of church. We, our family, we were prominent at church, but it didn't seem to me that my parents or sisters practiced what was preached. They weren't kind. It didn't seem that their hearts were filled with the love of God. We did not pray together as a family, though I was told to say my prayers every morning and every night. If I forgot, I was punished."

He stopped and shrugged. "Something didn't seem right to me about that. In the Bible, Jesus spoke of love. I didn't see that in our household, and when I mentioned that to my father, he told me that he beat me out of love because he wanted me to grow up and be a man and then, for complaining, he proceeded to beat me again.

"Anyway, I went about my life as steadily as I could. My father was a landowner. I was well-fed, which was more than some could say. More than most could say. In January, right after my tenth birthday, I was walking to school and saw one of my sisters, Saralee, sneaking off with a boy. His name was Sean. He was a bully. I knew that firsthand. He hated me. I think that was because his family was poor and we had money. In our little town, everyone attended the same school. That's how it is in the country. This Sean, Sean Covey, he was older than me by three years and I had been his whipping boy many times. I decided it would be a good idea to follow them and see what was going on between the two of them, my sister and Sean Covey.

"There was a kirk, a church, just down the lane from the school and they went there. They didn't go inside. They went behind the building and I snuck up and stayed out of sight behind a small wagon, and watched and listened. They had sex. Afterward, they sat there and talked and my sister told him that she was pregnant. He became angry. She cried. She asked him to marry her. He told her that my father would not allow that to happen and would more than likely have him killed or jailed. They tried to find a way out of their trouble and he said it was too bad that I was so young, because they could blame it on me. My own sister laughed at that and agreed."

Billy stopped and shook his head. "It startled me. I had no idea my sister had such disdain for me that she would think of falsely accusing me of impregnating her. In my shock, I fell over the wagon where I was leaning to listen. By the time I got to my feet both Sean and my sister were standing there. They started calling me all kinds of horrible names and threatening to do all kinds of harm to my person. So, I ran. They both chased me. I ran toward some cliffs where I was used to hiding, but they were right

behind me. I turned to face them. Sean called me stupid for getting myself cornered. He said, 'got ya now.' He moved forward and went to grab me and I jerked my arm away from him, lost my balance and fell over the side of the cliff. My sister screamed. I remember that well. Then she screamed at him. She screamed saying he'd killed her brother." Billy looked up at Eric.

"I'm guessing you weren't dead?" Eric stated with a smile.

"I was not. I was on a narrow ledge about twelve feet down. I was glad I wasn't lying at the base of the cliff because it was about three hundred feet down. I was also glad that my sister seemed to at least be dismayed at my demise. But then something truly horrible happened. My sister, she started screaming again. She said, 'What are you doing? Stop! What are you doing?' Sean said, 'Nothing to lose now. You and your brother were laying out of school and you got careless and you both fell over the cliff. That's what they'll think, anyway.' Then I heard a scuffle. It dawned on me what was happening. I yelled up there. Trying to let him know that I wasn't dead. That there would be a witness. But they didn't hear me. Next thing I know, my sister's body went flying past me. Her scream grew fainter and fainter. It took her what seemed like forever to hit the bottom.

"I was in shock. I laid on my stomach looking down at her crumpled body and I cried. After awhile though, I realized something. I had no way of getting up that cliff. It was a solid sheer rock wall. I was stuck on that ledge unless someone found me. My sister died quickly. I was gonna die a long, slow, excruciating and very cold death on that cliff side."

Billy shuddered and looked up at Eric.

"Do you need to take a break?" Eric asked.

He shook his head. "No. Just thinking about how the next part goes." He nodded his head and went on. "I laid there on that cliff the whole day. I called out over and over until I lost my voice. I was hoping maybe someone could hear at least an echo and wonder where it was coming from, but as you can guess, no one came. I was so tired and I was struggling terribly to keep my eyes open because I was afraid of falling asleep and tumbling off the cliff. So, I backed up as close to the wall as I could get. The sun started going down and it got cold and I started shivering pretty bad. My teeth were chattering and then it got worse.

"The wind picked up and it began to snow. I knew I would probably be dead by morning. I was scared. I'd already cried over my sister and swore to myself that I wouldn't cry over my own life, but every once in a while, a tear would make its way down my face. It finally dawned on me to pray. Actually, it didn't dawn on me. It seemed that the wind blowing through the hills was saying, prraaayyyy, pprrraaayyy. So, I began to pray. I begged God to rescue me. I begged Him to send someone to the cliff edge to find me. I prayed and begged Him all night long. I remember as the gray of dawn began to edge its way into my consciousness, that I was surprised that I'd made it to another day.

"I was weak and hungry and thirsty. I tried to scrape some of the snow off the cliff edge to put in my mouth, but there wasn't much because of how hard the wind was

blowing. At first, with the dawning of a new day, I was surprised and glad that I'd actually made it through the night. But it wasn't long before I began to regret it because I was so cold, the shivering felt like it was gonna make me fall into a heap of pieces. I was dizzy. My fingers and toes began to ache and I knew soon I wouldn't be able to feel them at all.

"I was suffering so much that I stopped asking God to save me and began asking Him to go ahead and take me. I told Him I was sorry if I disappointed Him in any way and asked Him to actually comfort my father, for I knew that the loss of his only male child would be something he may not recover from. Actually, I felt compassion for him for the first time.

"I thought of my mother and sisters. It seems that when you are confronted with your own death, you have a tendency to become extremely honest in your feelings and your attitude. So, as I laid there and thoughts of my mother and sisters entered my mind, something occurred to me. My mother was not the sweet, kind, woman that she should be. She nagged at my father constantly. She told him that men were stupid and lazy. She taught my sisters the same. I realized it was because my mother was such a shrew, such a termagant, that my life had been so hard. My father had not been man enough to stand up to her and he therefore, stood up to me instead. I forgave him. I forgave him as I lay dying on that cliffside. He'd been trying to teach me to be a the strong man that he wasn't, to be someone who would attract a woman who was kind and sweet.

"As the day went on, I intermittently tried to call out again, but my throat was raw and I was weak. When the sun started to go down I knew it wouldn't be long now. I knew soon I'd be dead. I thought I believed in eternal life, but as I lay there dying, I began to have scary thoughts. What if this was it? What if there was no God? What if there was no Son of God, Jesus, who died for our sins and came back to life and overcame death? What if it was all a lie? I prayed harder, begging Jesus to talk to me. To teach me. To tell me that He was indeed real.

"I couldn't feel my toes anymore. My hands wouldn't work anymore. In the darkness of night I leaned my head back against the cliffside and closed my eyes. I think I fell asleep. Or passed out. I woke though, when I felt a warm hand on my face. I opened my eyes, thinking I'd finally died. There was a man kneeling on the cliff beside me. He had a light all around him. He gave me some water to drink out of a small bowl. The water was slightly warm and slightly sweet and it tasted like the finest water I'd ever had in my short life. It warmed me to my toes and I felt so much better. The pain and the numbness went away immediately. He smiled at me with such love and compassion. He said, 'William, take heart and be brave.'"

Billy smiled. "I'm not sure if he meant that to be a small reference to Braveheart, which was supposedly a nickname given to the Scottish hero, William Wallace, but was actually a name given to Robert the Bruce."

Eric smiled. "So, you're saying that William Wallace in the movie, was not actually Braveheart?"

"No. I mean, yes, that's what I'm saying. The movie *Braveheart* is filled with inaccuracies. Still, it was well-done and very much fun to watch."

Eric chuckled. “It was, though very bloody. Please, go on.”

“The angel that came to me on that cliff said to me pretty much everything your angel said to you. He told me God was real. His Son, Jesus came to the earth through a virgin birth, he died for us on the cross and was resurrected. He said Jesus holds the keys to death and to hell. That is true. He told me that I would live, if I still wanted to live. He told me I had a choice to go home to God or to live and fulfill a great mission of teaching the world. ‘Teaching the world what?’ I asked. He told me to teach them that God and His Son are real. They are one in purpose. They are one in thought, word and deed. He said it is hard for us humans to understand, but just go with it and keep our minds open to understanding.

“He said I had to live a noble life from this point forward. I had to teach others what I know. I argued that I didn’t know much about anything but he said I would. He told me to read and study the Bible and pray over every single bit of it. Pray for understanding and deeper meanings. Don’t listen to other men, like Bible scholars. Take everything, every question, to the Lord and allow Him to teach me. He said the Bible was encoded, and even parts we might not think are interesting are still important, parts like how many golden bowls were recovered in the book of Ezra.”

Eric smiled and nodded.

“He told me to be completely honest in all of my dealings. To not hunger after things of this world. To try to live beyond reproach. We are not saved by our good works, but we are able to save others by them. He asked me what I learned while lying on the cliffside. I told him I learned to let go of my life. He said that was good, but there was something else, something that helped me understand my father. So, I told him what I thought about my mother and sisters. He said I would eventually counsel others on how to have a good relationship. I would counsel others on the roles we are to play. He said God created male and female and they have roles to play. He said neither are supposed to be diminished. He said God did not make mistakes in their creation. They are to give and take. Serve and be served.

“He said that Satan knows to destroy the world one only has to destroy the relationship between man and woman. Whisper in a woman’s ear to disrespect her man. It’s so easy. It worked in the garden with Eve. Look what happened, though, God allowed *that* to happen. Satan whispers in a man’s ear to hurt a woman. It’s so easy. Now women feel like they’d be better off without a man in their lives. Men are beginning to think the same, that life would be better without having to contend with a woman. He said my calling is to combat this evil in any way that I can. I saw firsthand how a contentious woman can destroy lives. Since then I’ve seen firsthand how a mean, overbearing man can destroy a woman. That destroys the human race. But when we do it right, like you have, Grandmaster Kino, then it brings more joy than anyone can even comprehend.”

Billy shrugged. “He taught me a lot on that cliffside. It was late afternoon on the third day that he said he had to leave. He cautioned me again to live an exemplary life. To honor my father and even my mother. To teach them both gently. They won’t pay much attention to me at first, but to live so that they will begin to see that something

changed me on that cliffside. I didn't want him to leave me. He promised that I am not alone. Not ever. That Jesus and the Holy Spirit are by my side and to reach out and watch for the signs and listen to the promptings. He said it's a good exercise to do this and learn the voice of God. He bid me farewell and the light gathered in around him until he was just a pinpoint of light, and then disappeared completely.

"Only a few seconds after he left me I heard people above me calling out 'Billy—Saralee!' I didn't think I'd be able to answer, but I found my voice and called, 'Here, I'm here!' Of course there were shrieks of joy and a rustling of activity. I looked up to see several faces peering down at me. Soon a rope was thrown over the side of the cliff and a man was lowered down to me. The joy turned to sorrow of course, when I pointed to Saralee's body at the bottom of the cliff where eagles were currently feeding on her. It was a horrible sight. Then things got worse when I reported that Sean Covey had caused me to fall over the cliff and then he'd thrown Saralee over the cliff to cover his tracks. He denied it of course. I didn't tell of the pregnancy because I didn't think it was important enough to sully her name, though if asked directly I wouldn't have denied it, because the angel told me to be honest in all things.

"Since that time, over the course of the years, I learned a lot. I prayed almost always. My mother and sisters began to change. My father began to stand up and be a man. He stood up to the constant nagging of the females in our household and set them straight. I finally began to feel that I was an important part of our family. I grew up. World War II came around and I was conscripted into the military. That is when I became the warrior I was meant to be. I finally became a man. I became a second lieutenant and commanded a platoon. We fought. We fought hard. We lost many men. I was wounded in 1946 when I charged a machine gunner who was mowing down our troops. I took three bullets. I was awarded the Victorian Cross. That's when I met my bonny Jeanne. We married in 1947."

Eric smiled. "1947! Billy, that was long before I was even born. May I ask, just how old are you?"

Billy smiled. "You certainly may. I just turned ninety-eight yesterday."

Eric's eyes opened wide. "Ninety-eight?" He shook his head. "Now who is looking quite chipper for his age?"

Billy grinned. "I suppose I am."

"And yesterday was your birthday?"

"It was and I was in prayer all day and finally, Jesus whispered to me to come here to see you immediately. And so, here I am."

Eric sighed. "Okay. And I'm very glad that you're here. But tell me, why can't you tell me your name?"

"Oh I can. And I will. I'm getting to that. You know, us Scots are quite the story tellers."

Eric chuckled. "Well then, please go on. You have me on pins and needles."

Billy nodded, his eyes twinkling with pleasure. "I married my Jeanne in 1947. She passed away at the age of eighty. I very much look forward to our reunion, as you can imagine."

"I certainly can."

"We had two sons, Oliver and Lewis. Ach, they were such bonny lads. I tried to teach them well. *We* tried to teach them well. They were good lads. They were strong. They loved God. There were no wars goin' on at that time for the Scots, but there was civil unrest and riots between the Catholics and Protestants. And my Lewis, young Lewis only nineteen years old, on his way to see a girl that he was sweet on, was shot and killed by her Catholic brother."

"Oh, Billy, I am so very sorry," Eric said softly.

Billy nodded. "Thank you. His brother Oliver was devastated. He was only a year older than Lewis and they were very close. He got lost for awhile and finally decided he needed to leave Scotland. He went to America full of hopes and dreams. On the plane to the United States he met an Irish girl. Her name was Caitlin. They fell in love and married. They had three children. Leo, Isobel and Malcolm, the youngest. It was the late 60's, early 1970's and things here in America were getting pretty wild. Oliver and Caitlin began to dream of returning to Scotland. They held on until Malcolm graduated from high school in 1985, but then Oliver and Caitlin decided America was not all it was cracked up to be and they longed to come home to Scotland. Leo and Isobel were all in because their parents had filled them with stories of the beautiful Scottish countryside. However, young Malcolm wasn't having any of it. He refused to leave. No way was he gonna leave his lifestyle in the US. It was the 'land of opportunity' he insisted. Things became quite heated and Malcolm departed ways with his family, not on good terms."

Billy eyed Eric. "Now, before I go any further, I think it's time to disclose my name. Earlier in our discussion, we spoke about William Wallace, the famous Scottish knight. I am actually named after him, after a mighty warrior, though I am undeserving. I actually am genuinely a direct descendant of William Wallace's brother, John Wallace."

"Interesting." Eric was beginning to see what was being disclosed. "So, you're name is truly —William Wallace?"

Billy nodded. "It is. And that's important for you to know as I disclose the next details. As I said earlier, Malcolm cut ties with the family and opted to stay in the US. We lost track of him. He wouldn't answer our attempts to reach him. Not by phone. Not by mail. Not by courier. It hurt. He was my grandson. He opted to have nothing to do with the family. Even when my son, Oliver, Malcolm's father, passed away ten years ago of brain cancer, we were unable to reach Malcolm. We hired a private investigator and finally found information about Malcolm, though we are still unable to locate him. The information we found was he lived in a green, rainy, cold area of the United States. Can you think of an area like that?"

"Washington State or Oregon," Eric said softly.

Billy's eyes twinkled. "Yes. Very good. Yes, we found that Malcolm married and had a child. A son. The PI did find a marriage certificate. Malcolm's wife's name was Anna."

Eric nodded in understanding and sighed deeply as he realized what Billy was saying. "Malcolm and Anna Wallace?"

Billy nodded. “That’s right. And they had one son...”

“Cameron,” Eric whispered.

Billy nodded. “That’s right, Eric, Cameron Wallace, your son-in-law, is my great grandson. And that beautiful child your daughter was holding in there, is my great, great grandson.”

Eric sat quietly for several seconds, stunned with the information, though as usual, you couldn’t tell that he was stunned.

Billy’s eyebrows rose. “Well now, I have to say, Grandmaster Kino, that I was expecting more of reaction than that.”

Eric’s eyes focused on Billy and then he chuckled. “Sorry. Take no offense to that. Your story was excellent. My reaction is part of our warrior training. School the features. I’m just taking a few seconds to digest and integrate this information.” He sat for several more seconds.

“What say you, Grandmaster Kino?” Billy urged.

Eric smiled. “So much. First, the story you just told is sad in so many ways, but you haven’t let the sadness defeat you. You are indeed a warrior. Second, the Lord had you come here immediately, so I’m wondering why the rush. Third, I’m sure you’re eager to meet your great grandson, but that probably won’t be possible until tomorrow. And fourth...”

“Why not? Where is he?”

“Well, he too is a warrior. If you were gathering information on him I’m guessing you know that he’s a JETT, working for Ameritech and right now, Cam is working undercover gathering evidence against a bunch of crooked cops. He might be able to finish up today, but more than likely tomorrow. He’s been gone a week. I think he’s going to be very happy to meet you.”

Billy smiled. “I hope so. And I interrupted you. You were about to say a fourth thing.”

Eric nodded with a smile. “You may be old but your mind is sharp. Yes, I was about to say, that all this means that– you and I are family.”

Eric rose and came around the desk, offered his hand and pulled Billy to his feet and then brought him into an embrace. They firmly patted backs and when they pulled away, Billy’s eyes were moist with unshed tears.

They sat down again, only this time Eric pulled a chair up to sit right in front of Billy and they sat face to face.

Billy sighed. “So, tell me the significance of one twelfth. I said I knew it must be significant. I don’t know why.”

“Well, then, let me fill you in. Last year I was walking on the beach contemplating my life and I thought, surely I’m not the only one who had an angel appear to me. There must be others. Of course, there are thousands of people online who say they have interacted with angels, but none like mine. Until I met Ronny. Ronny is Reverend Ronald Clark. He too went missing for three days and he too had an angel appear to him and tell him almost exactly the same things as my angel did and as your angel did.”

“Interesting. So there are three?”

"Three is a good number, but no. It's been given to me that there are twelve. And you, Billy, are one of the twelve."

"Ah, now I see. Twelve, huh? A good number. Why though? Have we been given a great mission?"

"I believe we will be called upon soon to do something. I don't know what that is. Whatever it is, it will require twelve."

"Well, I hope it will be soon, because, well, I'm not getting any younger."

Eric smiled. "So far, including you, we've found seven."

"Seven! Amazing!"

Eric nodded. "It is amazing. There is Ronny, who is right here in California. And the guest I told you about, who is staying here at my home currently, his name is Alo Quinn. He's Native American from the state of Oklahoma here in the US. There is Ces Iman who is Aboriginal from the east coast of Australia. Just last week we found Thomas Sawyer, who is from Kansas but is currently in Pine Forest, Georgia. Only a few days ago, we were found by Henrik Johansen, who is in Olso, Norway, and now we can add Billy Wallace, from Scotland, and of course, myself."

"I would so love to meet them all."

Eric nodded. "Me as well, in person. But until then, we've started an email group. We've transcribed everyone's accounting and sent it by email to the ones we have so far. We'll add your accounting to that by the end of the day. We've had a Zoom call with the six we had before I met you. We'll have to schedule another one so that you can meet them."

"Will you send me the other's stories?"

"Yes sir, I'll make sure that happens within the next few hours."

"And you said one of them, is here in your home right now?"

Eric nodded. "Yes. His name is Alo Quinn. He's eighty-three. When he arrived here a few days ago, he was in a wheelchair as he's been for many years. But Jesus healed him right here in front of our eyes and he can now walk. It was such a beautiful happening. Shall we go out and see if he and his sweet wife are out and about?"

"Oh yes, let's do," Billy said.

Eric nodded. "Before we leave the room, shall we have a prayer?"

"A bonny idea."

Eric placed his hand on Billy's shoulder. "Dear Father, thank You. Thank You so much for bringing Billy, for bringing William Wallace to us, for his safe travels, for his bright light. We're so grateful to find another one of the twelve. Billy and I would love to know the plan, but we will trust You and continue to seek you and pray that we will be able to rise to the call. We love You. Thank You for the gift of Your Son. Thank You for bringing us together. Thank You for so many blessings. In Jesus name we pray, amen."

"Amen!" Billy said jovially. He stood. "Let's go see if Alo is around."

Eric laughed and led him out of the study.

✝✝✝

January 21st 8:30 AM PST Tuesday Morning

Jason Lee Home, Clear Water Coast, California

Jason rubbed a hand through his thick dark hair as he spoke on the phone. He'd been at it for hours. He'd received word from Cam that there would be an attempt on his life when he went to the stash house to get the product. He'd already been to the house once, with his supplier, who had also been T-bone's supplier. It had gone down without a problem. Or so Cam had thought.

The tip came from Jass Smith, a girl from the high school whom Cam thinks is probably sweet on him. She says she got the word from Teo Peevey's mother. Teo, unable to post bond, was still in jail with a charge of accessory to murder among other things. He told his mother during a visit, that the dude who's saying he's now running things for the area, has gotta be an undercover cop because rumor had it that T-bone went a little crazy when one of the cops mentioned it to him. T-bone said he knew nothing of a new guy. This Jass girl told Cam that Mrs. Peevey went straight to bad cop Sergeant Milsap, hoping he would be thankful for the information and in return, spring Teo from jail. Mrs. Peevey gleefully told Jass that Milsap and Lieutenant Aranda were gonna take out the little snitch.

Jason decided it was a perfect opportunity to bring it all together, though it was gonna be a much bigger operation and he had to involve the CBI and possibly DEA. Jason decided to arrange a hit on Cam himself, using one of his own JETTS, Jon Sweet. The perfect cleaner information was put out there by undercover FBI and CBI agents who were infiltrating the cartels. They simply put it out there that they had an Aussie badass who would take care of all details. He won't even leave a body behind.

The guys running the stash house had bought it. They'd just hired Agent Sweet to execute Cam. Jason was about ready with all details. He was using a lot of people to make sure this thing went down with no mistakes, no surprises. The gathering and the hit wouldn't go down until sometime this evening, when Cam will arrive with the supplier at the stash house in Walnut Grove, a town south of LA, in an abandoned building that used to be a large auto repair shop. Next to it, a dentist's office on the corner and on the other side a fenced in parking lot.

The building itself seemed non-imposing, benign really. A white two story building with a few parking spaces in front. In the back of the two story office area, was a large space with eight bay doors where cars were once pulled in for repair. This evening there would be buyers, sellers, grunts and dirty cops pulling in. They will gather to get their money, drugs, and a front row view of what they thought was gonna be an undercover cop going down.

Cam was currently on guard and ready this morning as he made his way to the school in his black Charger with the flames painted on the side. Those guarding Cam's six were on high alert. Two of them disguised as other students at the school. It was an elaborate setup it would seem, but catching bad cops was ultra-important to Jason, because bad cops can do immeasurable harm to the community and this operation will be a game changer for the community surrounding *Oceanside High School* and surrounding *Hopewood Chapel* in Huntington Beach.

Oceanside High School itself was nice, with a great campus and exceptional

facilities. There was a new stadium, tennis courts, baseball field, soccer field. One wouldn't think there would be this kind of crime in such a nice area. But of course, the entire area wasn't nice, as evident in the apartments next to the church, though that is about to change. More to the point, people who live in nice homes and go to nice schools still do drugs and commit crimes. More than likely, the corrupt cops started their rein because someone in one of those nice, luxury homes paid off a cop or judge to hide his dealings.

Jason pushed back from his desk and went to find his wife. She would be in the kitchen making breakfast for two families who were currently staying with them. He walked right up to her and put his arms around her waist. "Good morning, Angel lady," he murmured.

"Good morning, Jason," she chirped brightly. She smiled at the two women and four children staring at her. "Ladies, this is my husband, Jason. Jason, this is Ms. Claire, and this is Ms. Laya, and these adorable little guys and girls are Nora, Aiden, Ivy and Chase."

Jason smiled and shook the hands of both women and all four children. "It's very nice to meet you. If there is anything you need, please let my wife or myself know. We are here to help make things right for you."

Angel smiled. Her husband, such a lethal man, was such a pushover.

"Well, um, thank you sir, for your hospitality."

"We're happy to help you. And I mean that."

"Are you Chinese?" Chase asked.

"Chase, that's rude," his mother chastised immediately.

Jason smiled. "It's okay." He nodded at the boy. "Well actually, I am NOT Chinese. I'm Korean. That's a little country on the east side of China and right across the sea from Japan."

"You don't talk funny."

Jason chuckled. "Well, I've lived in the US since I was about your age." His eyes danced. "But my older brother was a teenager when we moved here, so he DOES talk funny."

Angel giggled.

Jason glanced at her. "But neither of us talk as funny as my wife."

The boy shifted his eyes to Angel.

Jason went on in an exaggerated southern accent. "She says things like, oh Lord have mercy, oh bless your little pea-pickin' heart, I declare I ain't neva seen a little boy as cute as you."

The women all laughed.

Jason turned and smiled at his wife. "Honey, can I speak to you privately for just a minute?"

Angel nodded. "Excuse me for just a minute ladies." She followed her husband down the hall.

He sighed and pulled her close. "This evening I'm gonna have to suit up and take care of a problem."

"Is it Cam?"

He nodded. "This has turned into a much bigger deal. Cam going undercover to catch a couple of crooked cops has turned into dealing with a much larger operation. I'm goin' on scene. I have to make sure there are no mistakes today and we get our guy home safely to Jeffy and Eli."

"Is Jensen involved in this?"

"He and Jeff both are on overwatch and they won't let anything happen to Cam. I just wanted to let you know what's goin' down and that I'll be home late tonight, so I won't be here for dinner."

She put her arms up around his neck. "Come home to me, Jason."

"I love you, Angel," was his only reply.

✝✝✝

January 21st 2:00 PM EST Tuesday Afternoon

Lily's Place, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice smiled as he drove toward the old Sawyer home on Main Street. Lily stood in front of the house, looking up at it, her hands on her hips. Seeing her seemed to always make him smile. She had on jeans, some Nikes and her tan quilted jacket. Her hair was back in a single braid. He slowed because there was no place to park. A large roll-off construction dumpster took up the four parking places in front of the home and construction workers' vehicles were parked in the few remaining spots. Justice passed the house, went down and turned right into the *Gabe Tanner Community Center.* It had a large parking lot on the north side, between the building and the little park that was between the Center and *Lily's Place*. He pulled up and parked right next to Lily's car and walked across the park to join her on the sidewalk.

"Hey," she said with a smile.

"Hey," he answered softly, taking both her hands in his, leaning forward and kissing her quickly on the mouth.

She smiled.

"Whatcha grinning at?"

She gave a soft laugh. "I guess it's just the way I feel when I see you first thing in the morning."

"How do you feel?" he asked.

She shrugged. "My heart beats a little faster. I feel happy or like, excited to see you and get to talk to you."

He brushed his hand over her cheek. "That's really nice, Lily, and it's really good because I feel the same way. Sometimes, I feel a little down, thinking about my family, missing them, and then I see you, and all the sadness goes away. You make me feel happy again."

She blinked up at him. "Wow."

He smiled. "I know, right?"

She giggled. He looked past her toward the house.

"So, how's it goin' so far?"

"Let's go in and see. I was keeping my promise and waiting for you. But as you can

hear, there's a lot of banging goin' on, and lots of trips out here to throw stuff in the dumpster. I've seen the old kitchen sink and some broken cabinets being tossed in, and some sheetrock pieces and just a bunch of junk."

Justice nodded. "Let's go in and say hello to Mr. Hanley and see what he thinks now that they've gotten down a layer."

She nodded and he took her hand and they headed in and had to immediately step out of the way of a man carrying an old toilet. They turned and watched him toss it into the dumpster.

Mr. Hanley turned from where he stood by the staircase and smiled at the couple. "Mr. Sawyer, Lily, good morning." He offered his hand.

"Good morning," Justice said.

Mr. Hanley walked to a box and pulled out a couple of hard hats. "Go ahead and put these on please."

They each obeyed.

"Let me walk you through what we've already done and what has to be done. Upstairs, there are some load bearing beams that will have to be put in. We'll do that pretty quickly. Down here, the same for the wall between the kitchen and the front dining area. Electrical is gonna have to be upgraded as we already talked about which means all the walls will go down to the studs. It will all be completely upgraded. The HVAC intakes and ductwork will be reworked. Plumbing is a biggie. There were cast iron pipes and even some older lead pipes and some clay. It was a hodge podge. That will be a priority. Still, the demo should be done by tomorrow and the plumber and electrician will get started."

"That's exciting," Lily said.

The men nodded.

"Can we walk through if we stay out of the way?" Lily asked.

"Sure. Let me walk with you in case you have any questions."

They went upstairs first. Justice asked most of the questions. Lily listened and imagined the final result. She tried hard to see or feel if there was still any darkness in the place. It didn't seem like there was. There was so much activity, men working, men talking. Just as she had that thought, she heard a big crash and someone yell.

They hurried downstairs to the kitchen. A giant steel pipe from the bathroom above crashed through the ceiling and hit a worker in the head. He was wearing protection, but still had to be helped up. Mr. Hanley checked to be sure he was okay, but the man insisted he was fine.

Justice and Lily finished a quick walk-through and headed out. They stood together in front of the building. Justice took Lily's hand and they prayed for the safety of everyone working there. When he finished the prayer Lily glanced up at the upper window where she'd stood yesterday and had thoughts about jumping placed in her mind. She gasped.

Justice looked up. "What? What did you see?"

Her eyes were opened wide. "I, uh, I saw a dark shadow of like, a man, a figure of a man standing in the window staring out at me. He had red eyes and he pointed at me."

Justice sighed. “We have to do better. I’m gonna call a meeting with my grandfather and your parents and the Appels and Stewarts and Pastor Tim and anyone else. We need to be stronger. God’s light is stronger than any darkness, and there must be a whole lot of darkness in that house.”

Lily nodded as she looked back up at the window. “Well, I mean, that makes sense. God wanted your family to come here and battle this darkness, right? It wouldn’t be so important if it was just a minor problem. It seems to be much bigger than that. It’s weird that here we have this giant problem inside a building right here in the middle of my hometown.”

Justice nodded and picked up the thread. “Right, a famous town that the whole world is focused on right now because of your brother. Maybe the bad guys are gearing up to do something really bad right here in Pine Forest and it’s up to us to stop them.”

Lily nodded. “Maybe. I’m feelin’ pretty defensive of my hometown. We can’t let them win.”

“We won’t.” He sighed. “We need to pray really hard and listen really hard and get some direction.”

She nodded.

He smiled. “For now, you have to get back to the Inn right?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m working tonight. I’m training another chef and if that goes well, it will free me up to focus on this project.”

He took her hand started walking her toward their cars. “Well, I hope the training goes well, though I can’t imagine anyone being as good as you.”

Lily giggled. “Thanks, Justice. I love to cook, but there are a whole lotta people out there who are much better and more experienced than me.”

“I kinda doubt that. So, this chef you’re training, is she also just out of culinary school?”

Lily smiled. “Well, she— is a he, and no. He’s been a chef in a fancy restaurant in Macon, for several years.”

Justice frowned. “A guy, huh? Is he single?”

She giggled. “No. He lives in Pine Forest and would love to not have to travel to work because his wife is pregnant with their first child.”

“Oh, well, okay, that sounds like a good prospect to work at the Inn.”

“Yes it does,” Lily said as they turned to walk across to the park area. They didn’t get very far when they heard a loud crack.

Justice looked up, and quickly shoved Lily out of the way as a large tree branch came crashing down. The very tip of the large branch hit his thigh as he landed on top of her and he grunted in pain.

Pulling his leg out from under the branch, he looked down at Lily. “Are you hert, Lily? Are you okay?”

“I think so. Are you okay?”

He grunted as he sat up and rubbed his leg. “I think so.”

They both sat up as one of the Masters at *Appel Martial Arts* came running across the street. “Are you guys okay?” He looked up at the tree. “Good grief, that branch was

as big as a whole tree. It could've killed you. Sure you're okay?"

Justice stood and pulled Lily to her feet. "Yeah, I think so. It clipped my leg. I'll probably have a good bruise is all." He turned Lily to him and looked her over. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked as he brushed some grass off her.

She nodded. "I think so. Thank you, Justice, for thinking so fast."

He chuckled. "Instinct."

"Okay, if you guys are sure you're good, I think I'm gonna call the city and have them come clean this up and maybe inspect that tree. I think this is really strange. I mean, it seems like a healthy tree. I don't understand why a branch that big would fall from the top of that tree. No wind. No storm. The wood is not rotted. Very strange."

Lily and Justice both nodded and glanced over at the house.

Lily smiled. "Thanks for coming to help, Master Shelton."

He nodded. "I just happen to be looking out the window and saw it happen. Really glad you moved so fast. Well, I'm gonna head back in, I have a class to teach soon and I want to call the city. You two take care."

"Yes sir," they both said and headed toward their cars.

Justice walked Lily to her car and she turned and leaned against the door and smiled at him.

"Well, what do you have planned for the rest of the day?"

"I'm going to do some research and praying on how we can resolve this issue. It's obvious to me that we, or maybe, YOU, are being targeted. Or they could be targeting me by going after you."

Lily frowned.

"I mean, they probably know that you are special to me and if they hurt you then they hurt me."

"Okay, but why are they targeting you?"

Justice shrugged. "Good question. I'm not that special."

"Well, I think you are. Maybe we don't know yet something you're gonna do, or something you're gonna accomplish. I mean, like, discover the cure for cancer or something."

Justice chuckled. "Riiight. I think Dr. Kino Wallace has pretty much taken care of that. She's the healer."

"Right, but like, maybe you're gonna discover the best way to grow the purest, healthiest food."

He smiled. "That would be my father, uh," he sighed. "I mean my grandfather or my uncle's thing now."

Lily frowned. "Okay, but Justice, stop trying to suggest that you're not special. You are."

"Am I?"

"You are to me."

He moved forward and ran his hand over her hair. "*You* are special, Lily Tanner. *You.*" He pulled her close and kissed her.

She laid her head against his chest and stood there in his embrace, sighing with

pleasure.

"So, how's little miss Iris doing?" Justice asked, changing the subject.

Lily looked up at him. "Well, she's been on antibiotics for only one day, and she already seems to be feeling a little better. She was sitting at the table eating breakfast this morning, which she didn't feel like doing yesterday, so hopefully she's on the mend."

"Good. She's an adorable child. So full of light and love."

"Yeah she is."

He smiled. "Like her sister," he said as he hugged her close.

Lily smiled. The way he made her feel, it would be very easy to fall in love with this guy.

✝✝✝

January 21st Tuesday Afternoon

Ameritech Training Facility, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

Gabe and Agent Hall faced off.

"Go," Senior Agent Tristan Callahan yelled.

In only a few seconds, Agent Hall lay on his back.

"Go again," Tristan said tersely for the third time.

"Um, Agent Callahan," Gabe said.

"Yes, Agent Tanner?"

"Could you give him a sequence? I mean, like, when Grandmaster Kino trains me, he gives me a fighting sequence."

Tristan nodded and waved Hall over to him. He whispered an offensive sequence to him. Hall nodded and went back to face Gabe.

"Go," Tristan said.

Hall came at Gabe fiercely. Gabe had to think this time, he had to truly defend himself and it took him a lot longer to put Hall on his back.

Gabe smiled and nodded. "Better. You WILL improve and put me down too. It will happen," he encouraged.

Hall nodded. "You could make it a little easier," he said with a smile.

"Yeah, if I didn't like you. But I do like you and making it easier won't help you. When I was training for the Mini-MART I sparred with a bunch of guys who all beat the crap out of me. But that's how I got better. They didn't go easy on me."

Hall nodded as did the others. They all looked up as an agent came in to speak to Agent Callahan.

Callahan nodded and motioned to Gabe. "Agent Tanner, you've been summoned to the range by Agent Grimes. He has a problem with some of the trainees he's working with currently. You're dismissed. Go help."

Gabe gave a slight bow. "Yes sir." He grabbed his bag.

The agent who'd come to retrieve Gabe ushered him to an ATV and they headed to the range. As they pulled up, the agent smiled. "Just a heads up, Agent Tanner. It's the girls."

Gabe frowned. "Oh." He sighed. "Okay, thanks for the heads up." He squared his

shoulders, walked around the building to the outdoor range and stood until Agent Grimes nodded at him and waved him forward.

"Agents, this is Agent Tanner. I called him here to help you with your individual issues with your sidearms."

Gabe offered a slight smile and gave a slight bow, then turned and looked at Agent Grimes for further direction.

"Agent Bartlett step forward and set your table," Agent Grimes said.

Gabe paid attention, watching closely as the young woman laid out her gun and ammo on the table.

"Agent Bartlett, proceed when ready. Range is hot," Grimes said.

Gabe watched her lift the gun, load the mag, chamber the bullet, take aim and squeeze off a few shots at a target.

"Stop," Gabe said quickly.

The girl turned her head to look at him. He frowned. "Finger off the trigger and lay the gun down."

"Oh," she said softly and did as ordered.

He nodded, moved forward, picked up the Glock, released the magazine, unchambered the gun, and set it down.

"Your grip is all off. Don't be afraid of the gun. Make it like an extension of you." He stepped back. "Pick it up."

She did so.

"Load the mag and chamber."

She did.

"Aim."

She did.

He shook his head and looked at Agent Grimes. "May I approach her?"

"By all means."

Gabe came up behind her. "Don't look at me. Don't turn your head away when you have the gun in your hands." He took her hands in his and showed her how to grip.

She nodded. "Yes, I've already learned how to grip it this way, but it doesn't feel right. The way I was gripping felt more natural to me."

Gabe frowned. "Well, gripping wrong may seem natural but it's not the correct way and there is a correct way for a reason. So, practice the correct way to grip until it becomes natural to you."

"It doesn't feel right."

"It will eventually."

"If you say so."

"I do," he answered shortly, slightly irritated. He stepped back. "Put the gun down, then pick it up the right way and empty the mag at the target."

Sighing, she did as told.

He nodded. "Better. Trust me, it will feel more natural the more you practice."

Agent Grimes nodded with a smile. "Agent Gray, step forward."

Gabe frowned at the blonde whom he'd spoken to briefly yesterday morning at

breakfast. She grinned at him.

"Set your table, Agent Gray," Grimes ordered.

She did it quickly and efficiently.

"Range is hot," Grimes said. "Go."

Gabe sighed, but allowed her to finish her magazine.

She laid her weapon down and turned with a smile.

He shook his head. "Your stance is wrong, you're squeezing the trigger with a jerking motion, probably because you're anticipating the recoil, and you're not sighting properly.

She frowned, her hands on her hips. "Are you just looking for things to talk about or are you serious?"

"Yes and yes. I am looking for things, not to talk about, but things you're doing wrong, so that I can correct you and help you. And yeah, Agent Gray, shooting guns is a serious business."

"How do you know I'm not sighting properly?" she challenged.

"Go get your target."

"Excuse me?"

"Range is cold," Gabe said loudly. "Now go get your target."

The other eleven ladies all smiled. Agent Gray went to retrieve her target, walking back the last several yards.

He took the target from her hands. "You hit one heart. One head. The rest are outer body shots or misses. That tells us that you're not sighting properly."

She smiled. "One hit is all it takes."

"Yeah, but you don't get seventeen tries. You get one. The perp is not gonna stand there while you keep trying to hit him. He's gonna shoot you back or charge and take you down."

"And I suppose you always hit every try?" she challenged.

Gabe only sighed.

"Agent Tanner," Grimes said.

"Yes sir?"

"Set a table."

"I didn't bring my guns sir. I came straight from combat."

"You can use mine."

Gabe nodded. "One gun drill, or two gun drill."

"Two. You can use mine and Agent Gray's."

"Yes sir."

Gabe quickly set out two mags and two empty guns. "Sir, permission to sight the guns."

Grimes nodded. Gabe loaded the guns, sighted, shot, adjusted and finally emptied the chambers of both guns, reloaded the mags and nodded his head at Agent Grimes. "What would you like sir?"

"Let's do the drill Chief Davis had you execute."

Gabe nodded, trying not to smile. "Three heart, three head, three to each leg and

two to the neck?"

"Yep, but let's add multiple shooters," Grimes said with a smile. "Headshots on either side of your main target." He nodded at his aid. "Set it up."

Gabe smiled. He stood back and waited patiently for the targets to be set.

"Go."

Gabe moved forward and executed.

The women all stood stunned as Gabe released the mag, and un-chambered the second gun, laid it down and stepped back.

"Well done, Agent Tanner," Grimes said.

"Thank you, sir. I'll go get the targets."

"No." Grimes turned to the woman. "Agent Gray, I'd like you to go retrieve all three targets."

"Sir?"

"Retrieve all three targets. Run all the way there and all the way back and don't ever question an order again."

Gabe averted his eyes politely as the woman looked back at him before she ran to retrieve the targets.

Grimes went over the targets with Gabe and the women. He explained the "perfect shot" groupings to the women, and most of them were in awe. Once they'd all looked over the targets and realized the skill that Gabe demonstrated, Agent Grimes called them to attention.

"I had Agent Tanner demonstrate his skills so that you can all see that what he is teaching you IS doable and that he is quite capable of teaching you something. I also had him demonstrate so that you can see that though he is young, he is due some respect. I shouldn't have had to ask him to demonstrate his skills. Just the fact that I sent for him to come and help teach you should mean to you that we at Ameritech believe him to be worthy to teach you, and showing him a lack of respect is the same as showing me or Chief Davis, Chief Adams or even Chief Lee a lack of respect, and ladies, that gives me pause.

"I pulled Agent Tanner from a hand to hand combat class to come here and help you. That means he'll possibly have to make up for his missed class time while you might be enjoying your evening meal."

Gabe's eyes shifted to Agent Grimes, knowing full well he wouldn't have to miss a meal.

Agent Grimes went on. "I don't think arguing with Agent Tanner's solutions for your marksmanship problems shows much gratitude, and definitely shows no respect. Now, shall we continue? I'd like him to assess each of you, give you what he thinks you need to work on and then I will follow up with you tomorrow and see if you were able to integrate what he says. If not, perhaps we'll need to take a second look at some of your applications. There are not many women who can make it through this training. Do you think you have what it takes? Let me ask you, Agent Tanner? Do you think they have what it takes?"

Gabe swallowed. He was being put on the spot, but he was not a coward. He lifted

his head. “Well, sir, I, uh, I haven’t been privy to the skills and talents of this group of agents, so it would be hard for me to have an opinion. But, I *do* have something to say. I just called them a group of agents, because that’s what they are. They are females yes, but they are agents, and a lot is expected of them. The fact they are female means they are not as strong or fast as their male counterparts, however, as females, they can certainly learn to shoot as well as *any* guy.

“The shooter who shot me when I was abducted last year, was sniper quality, and that shooter was a woman. Men and women are different, but women can compensate for some of those differences. For example, though this group of female agents may not be able to run as fast as a man, they can run faster than some men, and they run as long as any man, or longer. So, skill, detail, and endurance can make them invaluable.

“Ameritech needs female agents. There aren’t that many. Some of that is because Chief Lee doesn’t cut them any slack. They are expected to do certain things. They are expected to get as strong as possible for a female. Be as level-headed and skilled as any man. So don’t come in here thinking I’m a woman, I’m better than any man. But also don’t come in here thinking, I’m a woman, you owe me equality. And also don’t come in here thinking, I’m a woman, I can’t do it.

“You *can* do everything Ameritech asks of you. There are so many things you can do, and this shooting thing is one of the things that you can outshine the men in if you put your mind to it. But also, don’t expect special treatment. You run all the way out to get your target and run all the way back,” he said pointedly. “And you should never disrespect your superiors here. You have no idea what they’ve been through to arrive at this place where they can share their knowledge with you.

“And while I’m on it, I can look around and see that many of you lack upper body strength. If you’ll work on that, you’ll hold the gun easier, your stance will be better and you won’t be so fearful of the recoil. Strong hands. Strong arms. Strong shoulders. Work on those things.” He looked over at Agent Grimes. “That’s all I have to say for now, sir. I’m ready to assess.”

“Agent Dunn. You’re up. Set your table.”

Gabe glanced at his watch. Just ten more to go. This should be loads of fun. Oh well, he thought. I’ve been asked to do a job. Do it right. Do it well.

An hour later, Agent Grimes and Gabe watched as the women took off at a run with their packs, headed back to their dorms.

“Good job, Agent Tanner,” Grimes said.

Gabe sighed. “Sorry sir. I’m thinking not a good job at all.”

“Why is that?”

“I feel like I lost my patience. Several of these women, girls, females, whatever you wanna call them, they act like there’s nothing they can be taught. They act like they’re gonna disregard everything I just showed them. I mean, no disrespect sir, but how did they get past Ameritech screening? They have really lousy attitudes. No humility. My sister can out-shoot every single one of them.”

Grimes chuckled. “Which one? Rose?”

“You know my sister?”

"I watched the engagement party last night. I heard she wore her gun under her dress."

Gabe chuckled. "Yep."

Grimes sighed. "Well, Agent Tanner, you did just fine. Why do you think you were asked to come here to teach today?"

Gabe glanced at him. "Oh, um, well, I thought it was because I'm usually good at teaching about firearms and I have a knack for pinpointing weaknesses. But now that you ask me that, I'm having second thoughts."

Grimes smiled. "Tell me about those second thoughts."

"Umm, well, was it more to see if I can hold my own and stand up to teaching under pressure?"

"And you did well."

"Then you mean, these girls, I mean these agents, they were all just giving me a hard time on purpose?"

"No. They are who they are. And by the way, Ameritech's application process does not fall down on the job, but it's not quite the same as the male application process, because, as you so skillfully pointed out, males and females are not the same. We have to hire a certain caliber of females. They have to have a little bit of bravado to make it here. Which means, they have attitudes, yes, though those attitudes will disappear eventually. Some think that attitude comes from their arrogance, from them thinking they are too good. But really, the attitude comes from them thinking they have to compensate and it only comes across as arrogance.

"We only want and need the best, with the best attitude. We don't take ex-female cops or soldiers who have the 'I'm better than any man' attitude. No tyrants, and definitely no princesses. We take only those who work hard, who are teachable, and who we believe can make the grade. You saw through their attitudes. You didn't call them down. You told them they were completely capable of achieving great success. It's a very fine line, Agent Tanner, and you walked it.

"As you said, we don't expect them to be as strong as men, or as fast as men, and like you said, there are things they can do just as well or better than men and that can help tremendously."

Gabe sighed. "I'm not even sure I understand what exactly you're saying. I do get that you called me here not only to help you but to teach me something as well. So then, what was I supposed to learn today?"

"To trust your instincts, Tanner, and you did that. You handled them well. You didn't escalate any situation. You did however, assert your authority when you had to and you kept your emotions out of the arena."

"Okay, and why is it important that I learn this lesson?" Gabe asked.

"Well, Tanner, you're being assessed every day. When you move up in this company, and you will, you will have been assessed many times. They don't want anyone to think that you had your position handed to you because your daddy is a Chief. They see you as a leader, Tanner. They will continue to assess your leadership abilities and skills and see that you learn what you need to learn, and they're gonna make it as

hard on you as they can. What do you think about that?"

Gabe smiled and then sighed. "I guess I think the same thing I said when Commander Edwards asked me the same question."

"What was that?"

"Bring it."

Grimes laughed and nodded.

Gabe frowned. "So, these assessments I did were real, right? Or are they all actually better shooters?"

"The assessments were real. You've seen their best. Hopefully, when you're invited back, you'll see a great deal of improvement."

Gabe nodded. "Well then, fingers crossed. And sir, like, how about a little notice before you invite me back?"

"Well now, Tanner, what fun would that be?"

✝✝✝

1 Peter 3:7

"Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with your wives with understanding, giving honor unto the wife as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers be not hindered."

Chapter Nineteen

January 21st 6:30 PM PST Tuesday Evening

Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

Gabe, with his laptop on his knees, looked over the Ameritech Training Schedule. There was whole lot to cover.

Ameritech/Military Courses:
Urban Combat
Close Quarter Combat
Zendo Ryu
Krav Maga
Hostage Rescue
PSD (Protective Security Detail) Combat Fitness
Firearms Training (Handgun and Rifle)
Advanced Tactical Shooting
Entry Team, High Risk Anti-Terror
Sniper – Open Field
Sniper – Urban
Reconnaissance

Counter Terrorism Theory
Explosives Awareness (Home-made, advanced, IED)
Mechanical Breaching
Mobile Force Protection
Combat Driving
Combat Driving – Off Road
Weapon Defense
Orienteering
Camouflage
Silent Team Communication
Squad Movement
Covert Movement
Assault and Defense
Tracking and Evasion
Combat First Aid
Wilderness Survival

Law Enforcement Courses:
Advanced Tactical Shooting
Active Shooter Scenarios
Hostage Rescue
Sniper – Open Field
Sniper – Urban
Entry Team, High Risk Anti-Terror
Mass Shooting Incidents
Executive/Close Protection
Surveillance
Air Marshal
Mechanical Breaching

He sighed. He still had so much to cover and his respect for Ameritech Agents, especially JETTs, grew.

Gabe switched over to the short school assignment he had to turn in before midnight and started typing. He stopped only a few minutes in when his phone buzzed. He picked it up and answered. “Hey Dad,” Gabe said softly, trying not to disturb the eleven other agents in the dorm.

“Son, how ya doin?”

“I’m okay. Just got back from dinner a few minutes ago and I’m trying to catch up on a class work assignment.”

Keegan sighed. “Well, I promise not to keep you long. So, tell me son, how’s your training coming?”

“Um, it’s going well, I think. I had to teach a bunch of girls, uh, females, how to shoot today. Well, I mean, they already knew how to shoot, they just weren’t doing it

very well."

Keegan gave a short laugh. "Fun times."

"Yeah."

"Actually," Keegan began, "I heard you did a good job and didn't let their little comments get to you."

"Oh, you knew. Of course you did. Well, Dad, not sure that I didn't let them get to me. I was wishing my sisters had been there so they could tell them that it's not just a guy trying to lord it over them. I really do know what I'm talking about and my sister's skills could demonstrate that."

"That's a credit to your sisters and I'll tell them you said that."

Gabe smiled.

"So, I hate to ask this of you, but you know Iris has been sick."

"Yeah, how's she doin'?"

"Well, your mom ended up having to take her to the doctor yesterday and she has strep throat and an upper respiratory infection."

"Oh. Wow."

"Yeah, but she's been on some antibiotics and already seems to be feeling a little better, but she's pretty weepy tonight and won't go to sleep. I was wondering how hard it would be to get you to Facetime with her for just a few minutes."

Gabe sighed. "Let me check, hold on a second." He looked up. "Hey guys, would you mind if I *Facetime* with my sister for a minute? She's not feeling well and wants to talk to me."

"One of your gorgeous sisters?" Agent Dyal asked.

"Yeah. The prettiest one of all."

"Cool. But only if she'll talk to me too."

Gabe smiled. "I think we can work that in. Everyone else okay with it?"

"Sure, go ahead Gabe. But we all want to say 'hi' to your sister."

Gabe nodded. "I'll hold you to that. Dad, did you hear?"

"I did hear," Keegan said with a chuckle.

"Oh shoot, Tanner, your father was listening?"

"Yeah. But it's okay. He knows how irresistible my sisters are. Dad, go ahead and Facetime me."

Gabe's phone rang again and he joined the conversation. Agent Dyal quickly got behind Gabe so he could see the screen. A beautiful little girl, her eyes wet with tears and her cheeks rosy from a slight fever sniffed and smiled at the camera. The child sniffed loudly. "Hey Gabe," she muttered into the phone and then used the back of her hand to wipe at her nose.

"Hey my little flower," he said softly. "Have you been crying?"

"Yes, cuz I wanted to talk wif you."

"I'm sorry you're still not feeling well, Iris."

"Mommy says I getting better."

"Good."

"Who's dat ahind you?"

Gabe smiled. “That is Agent Dyal, but I just call him ‘Soap.’”

Iris giggled. “Soap. Dat’s a funny name. Is it cuz he smells good?”

Gabe laughed. “Yep. That’s it.”

“Hi Mr. Soap,” Iris said.

Gabe glanced back at him. Agent Dyal rolled his eyes and then smiled at the phone. “Well hello there honey,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Iwis. I’m fwee. How old is you?”

“How old ARE you,” Gabe corrected.

“I’m twenty,” Dyal answered.

“Are you Gabe’s fwiend?”

“Yes. And you are Gabe’s LITTLE sister,” he said pointedly.

“Yes. Gabe has two wittle sisters. Me and Genny.”

“I see. That’s good to know.”

“Gabe can I meet the other fwiends who you sweep wif?”

The others in the room chuckled.

“Yes you can, Iris, because they all said they wanted to talk to you.”

Gabe rose, reversed his phone and aimed it at Agent Cader. The agent smiled and waved. “Hello there, sweetie.”

“Hi! My name is Iwis. What’s your name?”

“I’m George. You sure are a pretty little girl.”

“Fank you.”

Gabe went to the next guy. “Hey Iris. I’m Nick,” Agent Black said.

“Hi Nick.”

“I heard you’ve been sick,” Nick said.

“Yeah, but I gonna get better weal soon.”

“I hope so.”

Gabe went all the way around the room and allowed her to speak to agents Brock Ritter, Deebo Walsh, Drew Jones, Isaac Fletcher, Josh Holder, Juan Hall, Freddy Moore and Kyle Blade. She laughed at Deebo’s name and also thought it was funny that Gabe called Kyle Blade, “the Knife.”

Gabe put the camera back on his own face. “Well, little flower, we all have some homework we have to do and you should’ve been asleep a long time ago.”

She sniffed.

“Don’t cry sweetie. If you do you’ll make me sad too. And all the guys here will be sad too, right guys?”

“Yes,” they all said loudly as Gabe flashed the phone around the room.

“I miss you, Gabe. So, so, so, so much.”

“I miss you too, baby girl.”

“Will you pray with me before you hang up?”

“Of course I will. Close your eyes.” He watched as she closed her eyes.

“Dear Father, we ask you to please watch over Iris as she sleeps this night and keep her safe and heal her from her sickness so that she can feel better in the morning and fill her with your Holy Spirit so that she can feel Your love and sleep with no worries. Bless

her mother and father that they too can get some rest and bring us all together again very soon, we pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, amen."

"A— men," Iris said loudly.

Gabe smiled. So did the rest of the guys in the room. "Good night, Iris," Gabe said softly.

"Good night, Gabe."

"Good night, Iris," the guys all yelled.

She giggled. "Good night evewy body!"

"Son," Keegan said. "Thanks. And thanks guys."

"Our pleasure Chief Tanner," a few of them said.

"No problem, Dad. So, should I be worried about her?"

"I think she's getting better. She's only been on the antibiotics one day. Let's give her a few days. She already seems to have more energy."

"Okay."

"And I have to go now, son, because AMT has a huge thing goin' down in just a few hours."

"We do? Anything you wanna share with us newbies?"

"Not tonight. It will probably be shared with you within the next few days, video and all."

"Okay. So, is anyone I know involved?"

"Pretty much everyone you know. Jason, Joey, Jeff, Cam, Trout, Sweet, Jensen, Ward, Wyatt, Reyes."

"Wow. This must be big."

"It is. And today it got bigger. But I gotta go. Keep them in your prayers."

"Roger that."

"Goodnight Gabe. Goodnight Agents."

"Good night sir," they all answered.

✝✝✝

January 21st 7:30 PM PST Tuesday Evening

Undercover Home of Scottie Dawson, Huntington Beach, California

Cam came out onto the porch of the home being used as the supposed home of his mother, Linda Dawson. two miles south of *Oceanside High School*. His current name was Scottie Dawson. Scottie or Scott being a nickname he'd been given years ago when he first became a JETT. He'd been given that name because Cameron Wallace was a strong Scottish name.

He watched as Tripp drove up in his red Dodge Challenger. The car was so cliche' that Cam had to keep from rolling his eyes. Tripp, last name unknown, was Cam's contact for the stash house. He was the one who'd brought him to the house last week to make introductions to the suppliers. He was young. Mid-twenties. Cam knew that Tripp had to know that he was delivering Cam to his death tonight. Tripp thinks Cam is an undercover cop and that makes Tripp a good actor to be able to impersonate a pseudo friendship. Cam smiled at him as he parked his car in the small drive.

"Hey man," Cam said with a friendly smile.

Tripp nodded. “Scottie boy, you ready to go get some product?”

Cam nodded. “Let’s do this. Can’t wait to get down to business.”

“Yeah I bet.” Tripp motioned toward Cam. “Get your keys. You’re drivin’. I’ll ride shotgun.”

Cam sighed. “Oh, okay, sure.” He patted his pocket. “Let’s go.”

Cam listened to reassurance in his earpiece as he headed toward the car. “We are reading you both loud and clear, Cam and don’t worry, we got you covered. Like we said, you might have to take a few punches to get the HBPD to show their colors. Now listen, once you’re inside the stash house, touch your nose to tell us you understand. Right now, clear your throat if you can hear all three of us, Jensen, Jeff and I.”

“This is Jensen.”

“This is Jeff.”

Cam cleared his throat.

“You okay, there, Scottie?” Tripp asked.

“Yep,” he said as he got in the car and started the engine and revved it a few times. He pulled his ostentatious black Charger with flames on the side panels slowly out of the drive and headed to Walnut Cove, a thirty minute drive north.

“So, Scottie, where does your mom work?” Tripp asked.

“She works at the IHOP over on South Beach Boulevard.”

“She must work all the time, cuz I don’t ever see her.”

“Yeah, she picks up doubles whenever she can. But I got plans.”

“Oh, really?” Tripp asked.

“Sure. I’m gonna put some bucks together and get her out of there.”

Cam sighed. He knew that Tripp wasn’t buying it. Still, he held his front so that Tripp wouldn’t know that Cam knew that Tripp knew. What they thought though, was totally wrong, because Cam was not a cop. He continued the small talk as they drove. Finally, Cam looked up at the building as they pulled up and started to go around the corner to the back where they’d entered before.

“No, park in front and back the car in,” Tripp ordered.

Cam obeyed. There were a few cars there already. Cam eyed three empty spaces and backed into the middle one. Just as he turned off the engine, a black sedan pulled up beside his car and two men got out. He recognized them immediately as the Huntington Beach cops, Milsap and Aranda. It didn’t bode well that they thought Cam was an undercover cop and they didn’t care that he might be able to identify them, even without their uniform.

Cam got out of the car. Tripp motioned at him. “So, Scottie, things are gonna go a little different tonight. We can’t be too careful with so much product on hand. Pull your shirt up.”

Cam sighed and offered a frown. “You gotta be kiddin’ me. We went through all this the other night.”

Tripp shrugged. “You gotta problem with the way they do things, talk to them. You’re the new guy. Takes time to build trust. What’re ya worried about? You wearin’ a wire?”

Cam rolled his eyes and pulled his t-shirt up, careful to not dislodge the tiny camera in the ribbing of the neck.

Tripp moved forward and checked around the arm pits and his back, looking for wires, and then he searched him from the waist down looking for weapons. "He's clean," he said to the two bad cops standing there.

"Let's go," one of the cops said.

Cam passed a few guys leaving as he headed into the building. They glanced at him and hurried off.

"You're okay. I have you in my scope," Jeff said. "We're lookin' at all heat signatures and we've already scoped the place, but we also see everything you see, so hold steady."

Jason spoke next. "Once you get inside, there are eight guys. There are two undercover CBI. One of them is wearing the backward Dodger's hat, the other has on red jeans. You know the head guy, Juan Sanchez. The other five are *his* men. Two of the five are at the bottom of the stairs and will stay there. Sanchez is upstairs in his office. Two more of the five are outside the door of that office. The one remaining of the five and the two CBI are in the office. Remember, act like you just wanna get your supply and get out of there. No time for chit chat."

Cam touched his nose. He turned and smiled at Tripp. "Let's get my product and get out of here."

Tripp only nodded and then headed inside with the guy he thought was Scottie Dawson, pretend high school kid and undercover cop.

"So, where do we pick it up?"

"In the back. But first, boss wants to see you."

Cam pretended to be surprised. "Really? Why?" Cam asked.

"I guess he thinks you're special," Tripp said sarcastically. "What's wrong? You nervous or something?"

"Yeah, maybe a little, cuz you said we'd go in the back, get the stuff and leave. Five minutes tops."

There was a small snicker from Milsap and Aranda.

Cam eyed the two of Sanchez' men that were at the bottom of the stairs. They were both big guys. Cam and Tripp headed up, the two bad cops following close behind them.

The office was in the right front corner of the building. Cam glanced down the hall to the left and took note of four more doors.

"Turn all the way toward the left hall so we can get a better view," Jason said.

Cam turned and faced the hall.

"Wrong way, genius," Tripp said.

Cam turned back and headed toward the boss' office as he listened to Jason speak to not only him but all the agents involved. "Listen up, guys. In the rooms down that hall we get one heat signature in the first room, two in the second room, three in the third room and two in the fourth. Proceed with caution when it's time."

The boss man, Juan Sanchez, was speaking in Spanish as Cam was ushered through the door.

"Pequeño idiota pinga...Little prick. I'd love to take him out back and cut off his arms and legs, but instead the Aussie will be arriving shortly. Still, we are gonna have a little fun before he gets here."

Cam had to hide his smile as the man finished with some very colorful words and then ended his call and placed a smile on his face.

"Well there he is," Sanchez said brightly. "The young man who just might take the world by storm. How ya doin' young Scottie?"

Cam nodded his head and tried to look nervous. "Um, hello sir."

"Oh come on now, there's no need to be so formal." Sanchez stood and offered his hand.

Cam looked from face to face of the men who guarded him. They nodded and Cam moved forward cautiously and shook Sanchez' hand.

"Geez Cam, either you're a better actor than I thought, or you really are scared," Jeff muttered.

"Scott, uh, Dawson, right?" Sanchez asked.

"That's me."

"I wanna show you around the place."

Cam's eyebrows rose.

"Oh, man, Scottie boy," Jensen said in the earpiece. "That's equivalent to a masked gunman taking off his mask."

Sanchez rose. "Follow me."

The entire entourage, Sanchez, the two undercover CBI agents, three of Sanchez' personal guards, Tripp and the two bad cops turned and walked down the hall. Sanchez opened the first door where a woman was counting money and wrapping it in bundles.

Cam looked the woman in the eyes. She looked nervous and scared. The look of a trafficked female.

"Not much to see in that room," Sanchez said. "Unless you like to look at hundreds of thousands of dollars," he said with a laugh.

They walked down past the next two doors and opened the last door. It was a large room with four large metal cabinets stuffed to the gills. Cam was looking at hundreds of pounds of methamphetamines, hundreds of bags of cocaine and heroin, and thousands of fentanyl pills.

"Wow," Cam muttered.

"What do you think you see?" Sanchez asked, his brows raised.

"I, uh, I see millions of dollars."

"Very good. I guess you are a business man after all." He smiled. "Let's head down to the garage."

They went back down the stairs, through a set of large doors and another set of steel doors and entered the expansive garage area.

Cam glanced around, looking for windows. There were four high windows, industrial, about two feet tall and twenty feet wide, two on each side wall.

"Stop looking. I got you," Jeff said.

Cam obeyed and instead started taking inventory. There were ten more men here

in the garage area. They all stopped what they were doing and got quiet as Sanchez approached and then sat himself down in a leather chair off to one side and nodded his head. He was ready to be entertained, Cam supposed.

Jeff spoke in Cam's earpiece. "Cam, when this conversation comes to a head, Dodger hat is gonna pretend to get angry and hit you in the head and knock you out. Then they are gonna restrain you so that the bad guys can hit you a few times to get you to confess, but Sweet will be in soon. Just try to get as much info as you can out of whomever speaks to you."

Cam touched his nose.

Sanchez gestured toward him. "Scott, for you, I'm afraid that this is where the tour comes to an end."

Cam tried to look confused. "Oh, well, okay, so I can just get my product and get out of here?"

"Well, let me ask you a question."

Cam nodded, taking note of everyone's position and of doors and the car lift that was currently in the air. That didn't look good.

"When did T-bone tell you to take over the Huntington Beach territory?"

Cam shook his head. "T-bone didn't tell me. Teo told me. He said if something ever happens to him, I should take over. He said he'd already told T-bone that he had someone, and that was me. So, Teo got arrested and I heard about it and took over the operation as we planned."

"How did you hear that Teo got arrested?"

"A friend of a friend from his school."

"So, what school did you go to before you started at *Oceanside*?"

"I didn't go to school. I , uh, dropped out."

Sanchez sighed and called BS in Spanish. "I gotta tell ya, Scottie, it's been fairly entertaining. So, tell me, how old are you really?"

"What? You don't believe that I'm eighteen?"

"I don't believe anything you say. So, what if I told you that I've had my attorney speak to T-bone and to Matteo to arrange for their release and they both tell me that they don't know you from a hole in a wall, and you know what that makes you, Scottie boy?"

"What?"

"That makes you a dead man. Whaddya think about that?"

Cam smiled and spoke in Spanish. "Well, I say your attorney has his work cut out for him, because T-bone and Teo aren't getting out of jail anytime soon." He then added a few of the choice words Sanchez just called him minutes earlier.

The men all drew up, and Dodger cap moved forward. "You can't talk to him like that." He pulled his gun and wacked Cam in the head. Cam grunted in pain and pretended to be knocked unconscious.

"Calm down, Cy," Sanchez ordered. "He's gonna get his. Bind him," he said, nodding at Red pants.

Red pants grabbed Cam's hands and began wrapping his wrists together with duct tape in a way that would allow him to break free if necessary. Once that was done, one

of Sanchez' grunts poured a bottle of water over Cam's head. Cam groaned and slowly opened his eyes.

"I'm tellin' ya, Wallace, that is Academy Award worthy," Jensen said.

Cam made himself a mental note to get Jensen back big time for almost making him laugh.

"Hey guys, I know this might seem funny to you, but this is serious business, now shut up and get your heads in the game," Jason ordered.

"Yes sir, sorry sir. I was just tryin' to ease his tension."

"Well worry more about easing mine," Jason said.

"Hang him up," Sanchez said.

Cam was lifted from the floor. The car lift lowered slightly, a chain was wrapped around his already bound wrists and he was lifted in the air, his feet dangling inches above the concrete. He grunted again, this time for real.

Tensing his arm muscles to relieve some of the strain on his shoulders, he watched as the two bad cops stepped forward.

Milsap looked up at him. "So, I guess it's dawned on you that we know you're an undercover cop. We don't know what precinct, but you're definitely a cop."

Cam shook his head. "I'm not a cop."

Milsap hauled back and punched Cam in the stomach. Cam tensed his ab muscles at just the right moment but allowed a groan to make the man think he was actually hurting him.

Aranda stepped forward. "You're gonna tell us who you work for. We know you're not HBPD."

Cam chuckled.

"You think this is funny?"

Cam shook his head. "The fact that you know I'm *not Huntington Beach Police* only tells me that you are."

Aranda punched him square in the mouth. Cam turned his head with the blow, and turned back quickly and spit blood. "I'm not a cop."

"Then FBI," Aranda said.

Cam shook his head and braced for the next punch to the gut.

Milsap stepped forward again. "Did you think you'd actually get away with taking over part of T-bone's territory? Did you even think that when he gets out he'd be coming straight at you, you little punk."

Cam smiled. "T-bone won't be getting out."

Milsap swung at his face and Cam winced.

"You think you know? Well, Judge Brown says differently."

Cam looked surprised. "Judge Jack Brown?"

"Judge Horace Brown. He'll take care of things for both T-bone and Teo, and even little T, and they'll come hunting for you, but don't worry 'bout that cuz you're not gonna make that meeting."

"You mean to tell me that you and your buddy here and one lone judge, just three guys are able to turn my area into the cesspool that it is?"

Aranda moved close. “Oh, you wanna know who else? Well, ya know what, Scottie boy, I’ll tell ya, because you won’t be able to share that information with anyone, because you are a dead man.”

Cam tried to show fear. “And dead men can’t talk, right?”

“You got it,” Aranda said. “At HBPD it’s him and me,” he said pointing at Milsap. “And of course, Officer Delmar Holt, our handy dandy property custodian, and of course, Judge Brown, and between us four, we pretty much can make anything happen. And you’re about to know that first hand because we’re about to make you disappear and no one is gonna think anything about it.” He moved closer and grabbed Cam’s hair and shook his head violently. “Now tell us who you work for? FBI? CBI? ICE? DEA?”

When Cam didn’t respond fast enough, Milsaps stepped forward and punched him hard in the midsection, three times.

Cam grunted. “If I tell you,” he said and then stopped to let the wave of pain finish as Milsaps stepped back to let him speak. “If I tell you, will it save my life?”

Everyone in the place laughed.

Milsaps softly slapped Cam’s cheek. “You’re goin’ down, Scottie, but if you talk, maybe we’ll make it fast and not torture you. If you talk, maybe we won’t hunt down your family.”

Cam reacted quickly to those words. His legs snapped out and he had Milsaps head locked between his thighs. He squeezed. Milsaps’ eyes bulged and he pounded on Cam’s thigh to get him to release him.

Dodger cap moved forward and pushed his gun up under Cam’s chin. “Let him go, man. Let him go right now!”

Sanchez, highly entertained, glanced down at his phone and read the message. “The Aussie is here. Open the doors.”

At the sound of the doors opening, Cam released Sergeant Milsaps and the man fell back and scrambled away out of reach.

Everyone turned to see a black sedan roll through the bay doors, surrounded by ten men on foot. The ten were dressed nicely. In black suits and each held a tactical weapon across their chests.

The car made a turn and backed up slowly. The trunk popped open. A tall blond man dressed to the hilt in a tailored suit emerged from the driver seat. He walked to the back of the car and stood next to the open trunk. He then nodded and smiled. “G’day mates,” he said sharply. He motioned to one of his men. “Get the doona and lay it out near the mark.”

Everyone stood in silence as they watched a man lay his weapon in the trunk of the sedan, then lift a white quilt from the trunk and neatly spread it out on the floor close to wear Cam hung.

Sanchez nodded with a smile. The Aussie had style.

The man nodded and moved toward Sanchez, who stood and offered his hand but the Aussie only frowned. “I don’t shake hands and I know you know that.”

Sanchez lowered his hand. “Sorry, amigo. Habit.”

Jon Sweet smiled and waved it away. “No worries, mate. I will be out of your hair

in about two minutes. Fast, easy, clean. I'm a man of my word. I take it the young man hanging over there is my mark?"

"He is."

Jon frowned, lifted his phone and compared the picture he'd been sent to the bloody face of the man hanging there. "Messy. But at least I didn't have to hunt him down." He nodded at his men. "Lower him onto the doona. You know the drill. Tape his mouth, ankles, wrists, and his arms to his body, wrap him tightly in the doona and place him on the plastic in the boot, careful to place him directly in the center of the plastic."

They all watched as Cam pretended to fight off being bound and wrapped in a quilt like a mummy. Once it was done, Jon nodded at Sanchez and walked over to the trunk of his car and peer in at his mark. He casually pulled a gun from inside his suit jacket, pulled a silencer from his jacket pocket and slowly twisted it onto the end of gun." He smiled. "I dislike loud noises." He moved closer to the trunk and peered down. Reaching out, he placed his hand on Cam's forehead and closed his eyes. "Father, forgive us we pray for what we're about to do. Forgive the lie."

He then surprised everyone as he pointed his gun into the trunk and fired two quick shots. A few men in the garage actually jumped in startled reflex, not because of the sound, but because the act was carried out so swiftly and succinctly with no more thought than a casual pat on the back. Tripp's eyes got big.

Jon smiled and turned to face Sanchez. "One witness and one pic."

Sanchez nodded and walked over to peer in the trunk. Blood blossomed in the middle of the quilt, just above Scott's heart. But the more disturbing sight was the black hole in the middle of his forehead oozing a small trickle of blood. Sanchez, acting as casual as the Aussie, nodded at his man who moved forward and snapped off a pic.

"Well then, G'day mates," Jon said with a nod of his head and headed toward his car door

"Quick question," Sanchez said.

Jon stopped, his eyebrows raised haughtily and impatiently.

"What's with the prayer? What is the lie you ask God to forgive?"

Jon shrugged. "It's all a lie, isn't it? I mean, we are all here, all playing our roles. You do what you do. I do what I do. The person down the street will do whatever it is they do, right? In the end, it's all a lie."

"Not all," Sanchez answered. "There are some innocents."

Jon shook his head. "Nah, we're all guilty, mate. Every single one of us. Just some of us are more guilty than others."

Jon nodded farewell and opened his car door.

"You don't have a driver?" Sanchez asked suddenly.

Jon's eyes shifted quickly to make sure it wasn't a ploy to delay him.

He smiled. "I prefer to be responsible for my own fate. A driver only complicates matters."

Sanchez nodded. "You are— a very interesting fellow."

Jon smiled wickedly. "Don't get to know me too well. I promise, you won't like

what you see."

He got in the car. His ten men who'd been on foot made a large opening for him to turn and head out. Everyone fully expected them to follow him out, but instead they spread out surrounding the men in the garage holding their weapons up and trained on target.

"What's going on?" Sanchez said angrily.

At the same moment, coming through the open door where Agent Jon Sweet just drove out with his friend in the trunk, dozens of deadly looking armed men flooded inside the building.

Dodger hat and red pants both had their weapons pulled and pointed at Milsaps and Aranda. "Put your weapons down," they yelled.

The backs of the large group of men had different bright yellow letters on the back of their vests. Eight CBI agents, five HBPD officers, ten LAPD, ten DEA. There were ten others, those with Eagle insignia's on their breast pockets, led by Joey Adams.

Unfortunately, one of the bad Huntington Beach cops, Sergeant Milsaps swung his gun up to shoot and the gun was immediately shot out of his hand. The man was now cradling his hand and writhing on the floor in pain.

"Was that you, Jeff?" Joey asked.

"Yep, that was me. Jensen had to relocate to watch the offices upstairs."

Upstairs DEA agents broke through the last door down the hallway. They immediately put two of Sanchez' men down on the floor and cuffed them. Agents Trout, Reyes and Ward, headed into the first door down the hallway. One frightened woman stood against the back wall, her hands out in front of her.

"It's okay," Reyes spoke to her in Spanish. "You're okay. You're safe now. You're safe. Come sit down. Are there any others here?"

She nodded. "Next two doors down."

"Stay with her," Trout ordered as he and Ward headed into the next door. Two women screamed when they broke down the door. They calmed the women, took them back to the first room and went to the next door.

Three more women were there. One lay on a pallet on the floor, the other two gathered around her.

Trout spoke in Spanish to the women. "Is she hurt?"

"She's having a baby," one of the women answered.

"Chief Lee, we need paramedics upstairs, to the left, second door down. A woman in labor."

"Roger that."

Down the street Senior Agent JETT, Jon Sweet pulled over into the lot where law enforcement had staged before the bust.

He popped the trunk and helped Cam finish removing the duct tape from his ankles. Then grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the trunk.

Cam smiled at him. Jon grabbed him and hugged him tight, then set him back from him and nodded. "Scottie, good to see you, mate."

"Was really good to see you back in the garage."

"I bet."

"How's the bust goin' down?"

"It's done man. Only one wounded. Jeff had to shoot Milsaps in the hand. Everyone else is done. Everyone cuffed. Rights read. A butt-load of stash being confiscated as we speak. Warrants are being issued for Judge Horace Brown and Officer Holt. It's a good day, Cam. A great day."

Cam smiled. "It is and I'm tired. All I wanna do is get home to kiss my wife and see my boy."

"Well, you oughta clean up your face a bit first. Maybe take the bullet hole prosthetic off your forehead."

Cam smiled as he did so. "The prayer over the lie was a good touch while you placed the prosthetic."

"Yeah, I got flare," Jon said with a chuckle. "So, Scottie, let me have a medic take a look at you, cuz you look beat to hell."

"I have a world-famous doctor waiting for me. That's all I need."

"Gotcha. Still, the prosthetic needs to go, and we have to get dismissed."

"Let's do it," Cam agreed.

✝✝✝

January 22nd 12:07 AM PST Wednesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

June Flower Kino Wallace finished nursing little two month old Eli. She stood and bounced him gently in her arms to make sure he was sound asleep, then slowly laid him down in his crib that was in the far left corner of their bedroom. Her phone buzzed and she rushed to see the message.

She grinned. Cam was coming up the drive. Scrambling into the bathroom, she ran a brush through her hair, pulled on her robe and rushed out of the room. When she got to the head of the stairs, the front door opened. Suppressing a shriek, she ran down the stairs. Cam tossed his two bags aside and opened his arms as Jeffy jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and holding on tight.

Cam laughed and held her firmly against him. He stood still a long time until she finally lifted her head and looked into his eyes.

"Oh my goodness, Cam, I'm so happy you're finally home."

He sighed. "Me too. So happy."

She laid her head on his shoulder again and he squeezed her tight.

Finally he set her down and looked into her big brown eyes. "You are a sight for sore eyes."

She nodded and frowned as she scrutinized his face. "And your eyes look sore." She reached up and lightly touched the swollen flesh on the side of his left eye and the bruise on his cheek.

"Aww, babe, this is nothing. You know that. And it all ended well and life for our friends over in Huntington Beach is gonna improve immensely."

Jeffy smiled and nodded. "Oh how I've missed you. Seven days away, it's seemed forever."

"I missed you too, babe. And I miss my son. Let's go see him."

She smiled. "I just got him back to sleep so don't wake him."

He lifted his bags. "I won't. I have other plans."

Jeffy giggled. They headed up to their bedroom, turning left at the top of the stairs and going down to the last door on the left across from Jeffy's parent's bedroom. They opened the door quietly and set the bags down. He grabbed her hand and pulled her close and held her.

"You smell so good," Cam mumbled.

"You, um, don't," Jeffy said with a giggle.

He laughed softly and nodded. "Let me take a quick shower." He pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor.

Jeffy picked it up and followed him to help, taking note of red, raw markings on his wrists. He stepped into the warm shower and allowed his mind to relax. Then quickly reached out, grabbed his wife and pulled her into the shower with him. She squealed and then laughed.

✝✝✝

Shelley smiled and turned over in her bed to face her husband.

He was smiling at her.

"Cam's home," she said softly.

Eric nodded. "Took him longer to get here than I thought."

"I'm so excited for him to meet Billy and hear the story."

"Me too."

"Jeffy and Dani and I sitting there at the table last night listening to Billy and Alo and you talk about your miracle events, I mean, I could've listened to you guys talk all night. It's almost surreal."

He smiled. "And yet it's very real. Accepting that is the hardest part. Or integrating that is the hardest part. Life is not just the earthly things we do. The cleaning and cooking and the going to a job or to school, making a living, speaking in church. It's so much more than those things, and yet we have to take care of daily business. It keeps us grounded."

"It's a good thing to stay grounded or nothing would ever get done," she whispered. "Like, I have to clean the house really well because Cam's mother is coming on Saturday to meet her grandson."

Eric sighed. "The house is clean. You don't have to put on airs."

"Well, she's used to fancy living. I want to make her comfortable."

"I don't want you to wear yourself out with all of these guests. I would like you to hire someone to help you with at least the cleaning."

Shelley started to argue but looked into her husband's warm, loving eyes. Finally, she nodded. "Okay. I'll give some business to *The Dust Busters* cleaning business that one of Mark's clients started."

Eric's brow furrowed. "Honey, are you okay?"

Shelley frowned. "Why do you ask?"

He smiled. "You didn't even argue with me."

She giggled. “Oh, well, I’m so sorry. I actually just suddenly realized that I shouldn’t argue with my sweet, good, wonderful husband when he’s simply trying to take care of me.”

He rose up. “What is wrong with you?”

She laughed. “I’m okay, really.”

“Are you tired?”

“No. I’m fine. But really, Eric, I really am sorry that I always give you such a hard time.”

“You’re exaggerating. You don’t *always*. And when you do, I love the challenge. It makes life fun and interesting. And you don’t fight dirty. You’re an honorable arguer. So, don’t become passive, or complacent.”

She frowned. “Good grief, I try to show you some loyalty and support and you turn it into some kind of lesson about complacency. Well, here’s a little something for you. I want you to make sure the deck area is pristine. Pristine. Before Saturday. How’s that?”

He chuckled and sighed. “Now that’s better.” He rolled over her and pinned her down. “Kiss me.”

“No.”

He chuckled. “Aww, my Shelley girl, I am so in love with you.”

✝✝✝

January 22nd 7:30 AM Wednesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric gave little Angelina a kiss on the cheek and set her down in her booster seat at the kitchen table. He looked around at all the children, their faces glowing, their smiles wide, all except for Nate. Eric lifted him out of his seat and hugged him and then peered into his face. “You don’t look very cheerful this morning, son. Do you feel sad?”

Nate nodded his head.

“Can you tell me what you’re feeling? Or what you’re thinking about?”

Nate nodded in the affirmative.

Eric nodded at his wife. “Shelley girl, if you’ll excuse us, I think Nate needs me. We’ll be right back.”

Shelley immediately came over and kissed Nate’s cheek. “Okay, you guys go talk. I’m making you a yummy breakfast.”

Eric carried the almost three-year-old into the living room and sat with him on his lap. “Whatcha thinking about, Nathaniel?”

Nate sniffed. “Are you mad at me?”

Eric’s brow furrowed. “Mad at you? No, son, of course I’m not mad at you. Why do you think I’m mad at you?”

“You fwowned at me.”

“I did?”

“Yes,” Nathaniel said sadly.

Eric smiled. “Well, son, I may have frowned, but I wasn’t frowning at you. You’ve been very good. You’ve been kind to your brothers and sister, you’ve been obedient to

your mother. I'm very proud of you and when you're obedient, it makes me feel happy."

Nate smiled and then his brow wrinkled. "Then why did you fwown?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure. Maybe I was thinking of something and concentrating really hard. That can look like a frown."

Nate thought about that a few seconds and then nodded. "What was you thinkin' about?"

"When you ask someone that, you say, 'what were you thinking about?' You try it."

"What WERE you thinking about?" Nate said.

"Good job. And I don't know. I have a lot of thoughts running through my head. Like, I wonder what Mommy is gonna make you for breakfast, or I wonder what time Mr. Billy or the Quinns are gonna wake up, because it's gonna be fun to introduce Cam to them this morning."

"Cam's home?"

"Yes, he got home last night."

Nate's face lit up. "I'm gwad he's home."

"Me too. I love him. Do you?" Eric asked.

"I do."

"Doesn't it feel good to love people?" Eric asked.

Nate nodded.

"Well, I sure do love you, Nathaniel Kino. I love you so very much."

"I yove you too, Daddy."

"And are you glad you came to live with us?"

"Yes sir, I'm so happy I am here."

"Good. Now let's go get some breakfast," he said as he stood.

Eric carried Nate into the kitchen and set him in his booster seat. "Who's turn is it to say the blessing?"

"It's Manny's turn," Angelina said.

Manny smiled and closed his eyes. "De-a Fawda, tank oo fo are food. Um, bwess it. Jesus name, a– men."

"Amen," they all repeated.

Eric's phone buzzed and he pulled it from his pocket and read the text from his good friend, Justin Lee.

~~ Good morning, Eric. I just received an interesting phone call from a man in Thailand. His name is Sakchai Chen. This is his number. +66-XX-XXX-XXXX. It's late there, 10:45 PM, so you might wanna catch him now, though he says he's waiting for your call anytime day or night is fine with him. Sorry I had to send a text, but I am at the courthouse meeting with a judge this morning and can't talk right now. Have a great day, my friend.

Eric quickly texted back.

~ Good morning, Justin. I will call him right away. If you need anything, call me. Thanks for all you do, Justin. Let's get together soon. No need to answer this text. Concentrate on your meeting.

~~ You are so bossy Grandmaster Kino.

Eric chuckled.

"Who's texting you so early in the morning?" Shelley asked.

Eric smiled. "It's Justin. Looks like I'm gonna have to miss breakfast again. Two days in a row. I'm sorry, but I feel like this might be important."

Shelley smiled. "It's okay, Eric. I'll make you a smoothie and bring it to you in your study."

"Thanks, babe." He kissed her quickly and turned to the children. "I have an important phone call to make. Will you guys look after Mom and make sure she eats her breakfast?"

"Yes sir," they all chimed in together.

"Good. And when Melody gets here, which will be any minute, make sure you greet her and tell her good morning."

"Yes sir," they all said again, this time very loudly.

Eric chuckled and headed to his study. He sat in his chair and looked up the code for Thailand and dialed the numbers.

The man answered quickly. "Sawadee krap, hello!"

Eric smiled. "Sawadee krap," Eric said and then said in Mandarin, "I don't speak very much Thai, but speak Mandarin or Cantonese fluently. Which one would be best for you?"

"Either one, but I do speak English, so we can go that way."

Eric nodded. "Very well. Let's speak English. And so, hello, I'm Eric Kino and you are Sakchai Chen?"

"Yes. Eric, I am delighted to speak with you. God has pressed it on my heart very strongly, almost urgently, to reach out to you. I didn't know how to reach you, so I reached out to the law firm of the man who wrote the opening chapter of your book of memoirs."

"Ah, I see. So, you've read my book."

"Yes I have."

"May I ask how you came across the book? I'm just curious. There's only been about twenty-five thousand copies sold worldwide so far."

"Well, the way I came across the book was interesting. I was visiting Chiang Mai, a city in northern Thailand. I was sitting at an outdoor restaurant, and a man came up to me and asked if he could join me. I always try to take very seriously the people God places in my path, and so I agreed. The man said he'd noticed me because I reminded him of someone he'd met at a Buddhist monastery when he was a young man. He said I had the same light about me. The same calmness. He said the man he'd met changed his life. He went from being a Buddhist monk living at a monastery to a Christian man, married with children and grandchildren, and the happiest man in the world."

Eric sat quietly listening, as usual.

"This Christian man named you, Grandmaster Kino, as the man he'd met who'd changed his life. He said you never spoke to him about your beliefs or your relationship with Jesus Christ, but you did speak to him with kindness and love and he could feel

God's true love emanating off of you. This man thought that I was possibly related to you. He even said that I looked similar in appearance but more so, similar in spirit. I told him I knew nothing of you, but that I too was a Christian, a very devout Christian.

"We spoke together at that small table for two hours and finally, he said he had to be going, but he felt strongly that he should give me something. He reached into a leather bag he was carrying and handed me a small blue book. Your book, Grandmaster Kino. Your memoirs. At my hotel that night, I devoured the book. I couldn't stop reading it. I could feel your spirit. Your humility. Your wisdom. Your complete devotion to God. I cried over the loss of your first wife and I cheered for your successes.

"Eric, I began to search you out. I found the videos and accountings of your death last year. Well, I guess almost death. The prayer videos were filled with the Holy Ghost and I felt so strong that I had to reach out to you. Today, God scolded me and told me I was wasting time. But here's the thing, Eric, I was so intrigued by your story because I actually have a similar story, and it happened when I too was ten years old and I too went missing for three days and I too had an angel appear to me."

Eric sighed in relief. He'd been holding his breath, hoping this was another of the twelve, and indeed it was. "That is wonderful, Sakchai."

"I thought so too!" he beamed. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

Eric smiled. "Yes, it is indeed. And now, let me tell you something that will add to your amazement."

"Please do," Sakchai said, his voice bright with excitement.

"Oh, hold on just a moment. Thank you, Shelley," he said as his wife quickly set an insulated tumbler in front of him.

She kissed his cheek and quickly left the room.

"Sorry, my wife brought me some breakfast. Okay, what I was about to say is, a few months ago, I think it may have been October of this past year, I was walking on the beach, reaching out, connecting to Jesus, sometimes I feel Him so strong and that was one of those times. I was thinking about the visitation I'd had as a child and it came to me that I wasn't alone in this. I wasn't the only one. I was thinking that there had to be more people who'd had a similar experience. Then just a few months later, in December, I met someone who indeed had a similar experience. He'd been ten years old and went missing for three days and had an angel visit him. Now, over the past few months, I've met several more. So then, I began to wonder just how many of us there were, and it was told to me and subsequently confirmed that there are twelve of us."

"Oh my," Sakchai said. "This IS truly amazing and very exciting. So then, we have to find them, right!"

"Yes, absolutely right, but after speaking with the ones we've already found, we decided that rather than go looking for them, we must let them come to me, to us, as God sees fit to send them. If we put out a notice that we're looking for the others, we may have an influx of false reports."

"Yes, yes, that makes complete sense. So, you said the 'ones' you've found. Plural, right? So, that sounds to me like you are speaking of more than the one you said you

found in December."

Eric smiled. "Let me name for you the ones we know. Thus far there is Reverend Ronald Clark, a humble and devout ninety-two year old gentleman who lives right here in California. Then we met Alo Quinn and his beautiful wife, Dani. Alo is an eighty-three year old Native American Indian from the Quapaw tribe in the state of Oklahoma which is here in the United States."

"Interesting," Sakchai said.

"Yes. He too is an amazing man. Then I met an Aboriginal man over the phone named Dr. Ces Iman and is wife Hazel. He lives down on the east coast of Australia. I think the next one after him was Thomas Sawyer, a seventy-eight year old founder of a company called *Pure Foods*. I've spoken to him at length on the phone. He lives in Kansas in the US. After Tom, a man named Henrik Johansen reached out to me. He is a seventy-two year old English teacher from Norway. And just yesterday we found two more; Billy Wallace, who is a ninety-eight year old 'Laird' from Scotland. Billy is a chipper old guy and he actually traveled here and is staying with us presently. Also staying with us right now are the Quinns. And also, just yesterday, we had another one reach out to us from Uganda. His name is Andrew Musani and he's had quite a life. He's spent the last ten years falsely imprisoned for his beliefs in a jail in Ethiopia. He is eighty-five years old. So, including you, so far we know of nine of the twelve."

Sakchai blew out a large breath. "I'm astounded and amazed. This is wonderful, Grandmaster Kino. Simply amazing. More than I ever could have imagined. I feel simply thrilled."

Eric nodded. "It IS simply amazing and I am excited to be able to see where God is leading us. Why are there twelve? What are we to do? What is the important calling we have to do together? And it seems suddenly that there is an urgency. We found two in one day, yesterday. Will we find more soon? Today maybe? Sakchai, I want desperately to hear the story of what happened to you when you were ten, but I'm afraid I'm pressed for time this morning. Maybe you could get a good night's rest and call me tomorrow around noon your time, which will make it 9:00 this evening for me. Would that be possible?"

"That would be perfect and I greatly look forward to speaking with you again, Grandmaster Eric Kino."

"Sakchai, may I ask your age?"

"Oh yes. I'm eighty-four."

"Wonderful."

"And you, Grandmaster Kino, are seventy, I just recently learned because after I read your memoirs I did a deep dive into your life. So, if you are seventy, that means you are the youngest of the twelve."

"Yes, so far, that seems to be the case, though I understand that I have much wisdom and lessons to be learned from my older, wiser and more experienced counterparts."

Sakchai was silent a moment. "Grandmaster Kino, I didn't point that out to say that you are less than the rest of us because you are younger. I pointed that out because God

has just made it known to me that you are the leader of this group."

Eric sighed. "Interesting. Alo Quinn said the same thing. May I ask how God has made that known to you since you didn't even know there were twelve of us until a few minutes ago? And I realize that sounded disrespectful, but I didn't mean it that way."

"I don't feel disrespected in any way, Eric. Your logical mind came forth with a good question. Let me see if I can explain. I have always been into names. It's kind of my thing, if I'm saying that correctly in English. So, I felt God whisper to me as you were naming the others and he placed it in my heart to refer to your name. Jesus knows I'm into names and would therefore direct my thoughts in that direction. Eric, He was telling me that *you* are the leader."

"Refer to my name?"

"Yes. Our names are important and not random. So, Grandmaster Kino, do you know what 'Eric' means?"

Eric sighed. "Yes. It's an old Norse name that means— forever ruler. So, I don't put too much stock in my name, because we all know that Jesus is the forever ruler, the eternal king."

Sakchai laughed. "Your humility is noted. However, in this case, the case of the twelve, you *are* the leader. And I have looked into your name Eric, when I was doing that deep dive into your life. Yes, 'Eric' means 'forever ruler' but it also means 'ever powerful.' And that is only in the Nordic meanings. There is also Aric, spelled with an 'a' and it is of Hebrew origins and it is associated with figures of importance or authority and actually means 'Lion of God,' and this, I can totally see, Grandmaster Kino. You are a lion. You are fierce and powerful and loyal to God. Ask Him. I feel certain that I'm hearing His message correctly."

Eric nodded. "I will ask Him."

"Wonderful, young Eric," he said with a chuckle.

Eric laughed. "Young Eric, that's what our family calls my grandson who is also an Eric."

"That is delightful to have a grandson named after you. So, for now, I will say ratri sawat, which means 'good night'. I very much look forward to hearing from you at noon tomorrow. That is correct?"

"Yes, noon for you tomorrow, which is 9:00 PM tonight for me. Have a good night, Sakchai."

"You as well, Eric."

They hung up just as Shelley peeked back in. He smiled at her.

"Are you done with you call?"

"Yes. I just finished."

"Well, I want to hear all about it, but I thought you might want to know that the Quinns and Billy, and Jeffy and Cam are all sitting around the breakfast table."

"Oh, have I been in here that long? I'm so sorry. Did I miss the big announcement?"

"No. They're all waiting for you. Melody has arrived and taken the children downstairs to work on an art project. Cam has been introduced to the Quinns and Billy.

All Cam has been told about Billy is that he's one of the twelve, his name is Billy, and he's from Scotland. Cam told him that was synchronistic because he'd just come from working an undercover assignment using one of his undercover names, which is Scott, and that he uses that name because he's been told that 'Cameron Wallace' is a very Scottish name. Billy thought that was quite amazing and comical."

Eric smiled. "Billy finds humor in everything."

Shelley smiled. "He truly does and I have to say that I already just love him so much."

Eric chuckled.

"And so, Billy asked Cam about his assignment and what just took place and Cam explained all the bruising on his face and wrists and was proclaimed quite the hero by Billy and the Quinns. But before Billy told Cam his story I asked him to wait until you can join us."

Eric nodded. "Well then, let's not keep them waiting any longer." He grabbed his protein drink and his wife's hand. "Come, let's go and listen to Billy tell his story—again."

✝✝✝

Philippians 2:13-14

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

Chapter Twenty

They'd stayed causally sitting around the table as Billy began his story. Everyone but Cam had already heard it. Billy enhanced the telling a bit. Describing his old home in Scotland, and telling about his sisters personalities and making it quite humorous, though Eric knew their acidic personalities and hateful ways were not funny at all. It was sad.

There was a silver lining though, as Billy told how the dynamic in his family slowly changed. Then he went on to tell that his entire immediate family was now deceased. Billy's mother and father had passed over forty years earlier. His sisters and their husbands had all passed within the past twenty to thirty years. He had several nieces and nephews, most whom had passed, except for two nieces who were now living in care homes. He did stay in touch with his grandnephews and grandnieces and his great grandnephews and great grandnieces. He told how he also had two great great grandnephews.

Then he began to talk about his own two sons. He told the story of how Lewis, his younger son was murdered at the age of nineteen and how that devastated them all, but especially his older brother, Oliver. He told how Oliver decided he needed a change and came to America and met his bonny Caitlin. As Billy spoke about these people, both he and Eric watched Cam carefully to see if he recognized their names. It didn't appear that he did.

Billy went about finishing the story much in the way that he'd told Eric, telling how Billy himself was named after the famous Scottish warrior, William Wallace and was indeed a direct descendant of William's brother, John Wallace.

At that point, Cam had smiled and remarked that he and Billy had the same last name, still obviously innocent to what was being revealed.

Finally, Billy came to his conclusion. "So, I've told you that my son, Oliver had three children. And I've told you that two of those children returned to Scotland and one broke off all ties with our family and stayed here in the US. We lost touch with him. We have not been able to find him. We did find out however, that he lived in the northwest area of the country, that he married and had a son. His father, my son Oliver, got very sick and passed away from brain cancer ten years ago and we tried very hard, even hired a PI, to try to find Oliver's youngest son so that he could come to the funeral at the very least. We did not find him, but we did find some important information."

When Billy paused, Cam spoke up. "Mr. Wallace, let me just interrupt for a minute to tell you that I am so sorry for the death of your son."

Billy smiled and nodded. "Thank you so much, young man. That means a great deal to me." Billy got emotional and Cam reached out and patted his hand. "I didn't mean to upset you. It just struck me that you have been through so many hard things, lost so

many people that you love."

Eric, Shelley and Jeffy all smiled. Cam had no idea what a balm his words were for Billy Wallace.

Billy smiled and patted Cam's hand resting on his hand. "You're a very thoughtful young man. I feel I must hurry and tell you the rest of this story."

Cam smiled and nodded. "Please, go ahead."

Billy grabbed Cam's hand and squeezed it. "Cam, the names of Oliver's children, my grandchildren who came home to Scotland, are Leo and Isobel."

Cam frowned.

"And the name of their brother, my other grandson, my long lost grandson, is Malcolm."

Cam didn't react at all.

"We found that Malcolm married a woman named Anna." He paused. "And their son's name, is Cameron."

Cameron blinked hard and cleared his throat. "Um, are you telling me that my father is your grandson?"

"I am— and that means, that you, Cameron Wallace, with the fine Scottish name, you are my great grandson, and I am overjoyed to be in your presence and to be speaking with you, and to be able to lay these old eyes on you, you who look so much like my Oliver."

Cam stood abruptly, his chair almost falling backward if Jeffy hadn't caught it. He stood staring at Billy as his eyes filled with tears. Billy quickly stood and held his arms out to the handsome boy. Cam moved forward and was embraced. The first touch of Billy's arms as they wrapped around Cam, broke the dam. Cam laid his head on the man's old shoulders, which were strong and broad. They stood crying together for several moments, then Billy took Cam by the shoulders and set him back from him. He smiled into Cam's big blue eyes.

"My you are a fine specimen of a man, Cameron Wallace."

Cam sniffed and wiped at his face. "You are too." He looked him over and smiled through his tears. "I can't believe you're ninety-eight years old. You don't seem frail, or fragile in any way."

"I'm not. I'm hearty, and at this moment, so happy."

Cam put his hands on the man's shoulders. "Just look at you, I mean, you're almost as tall as me."

Billy nodded. "I'm 6'2" now, but I used to be 6'4". I've shrunk a bit. How tall are you?"

"I'm just on the short side of 6'3"."

Billy smiled slyly. "Ach, perhaps you'll grow."

Everyone laughed.

Cam sighed and looked into the blue eyes of the man in front of him. "*You* are my great grandfather. *You* are my kin. I haven't had anyone, not anyone who was blood related to me in my life for a very long time."

"Well ya do now, laddie. Ya do now."

Eric smiled, his heart swelling with love as he watched the healing begin to take place, healing for both men.

Cam blinked and then, looked over at Jeffy. “You knew?”

She nodded. “Yes, but only as of yesterday.”

“You didn’t say one thing last night.”

She grinned. “Well, it was hard, but I wanted Billy, or, great granddad, to have the pleasure of telling his story.”

Cam’s eyes opened wide. “Have you met Eli?”

“Ahh yes. What a fine little laddie he is.”

“You’re his great great grandfather!”

“I am, yes, dear son, and I hope you will allow me to be a part of his life, at least for the short time I have left.”

“Of course. Of course,” Cam gushed. He sighed and looked over at Eric. “Grandmaster Kino has been my mentor, my foster father I guess you could say.”

“He obviously has done an amazing job and just because I show up outta nowhere doesn’t mean his job is over with you.”

Cam frowned. “I had Ameritech find me phone numbers for both my mother and father. My mother actually called me back and is actually coming to visit here this coming Saturday.”

“But not your father?”

“No. They divorced. I reached out to them both via text message. She called me back last week. He has yet to reach out to me. She doesn’t know where he is, though she asked me to give her his number.”

“Cam,” Shelley said quickly. “Sorry to interrupt, but why don’t you and Billy go get comfortable and sit in the back den and talk for a little bit?”

Cam nodded. “Oh, yes, my mind is all over the place. Yes, um, Granddad? I guess that’s what I should call you?”

Billy nodded. “That sounds wonderful to me.”

“Okay. Granddad, will you come to the den and we’ll talk?”

“Absolutely.”

Shelley smiled. “Billy, can I get you some tea?”

“That would be splendid.”

“Cam?” Shelley asked.

“I’ll just grab a bottle of water.”

“I’ll bring it to you. Go on back to the den.”

Billy looked at Eric. “Eric, thank you so much for this opportunity.”

Eric shook his head. “This wasn’t me, and I know you know that. If either of you need anything, let us know.”

Cam nodded. “Jeffy, when Eli gets up from his nap, will you two come join us for a little bit of family time?”

Jeffy smiled. “Family time. That sounds so good, doesn’t it? I will be so happy to do that.” She kissed Cam’s cheek and watched him and Billy walk down past Eric’s study to the den.

Alo and Dani stood. Dani immediately started helping Shelley clear the rest of the breakfast dishes and clean up the kitchen.

Alo shook his head in wonder. "Eric, thank you so much for allowing Dani and I to be witness to that amazing reunion. It has touched my heart very deeply."

"Mine too," Eric said. He shook his head. "There is so much beauty and love and healing taking place." He smiled. "Oh, and Alo, a little earlier this morning, I received a message from a man all the way over in Thailand. His name is Sakchai Chen. I called him back and I think you're gonna be very excited to hear what he had to tell me."

"Are you gonna make me wait, or tell me now?"

"I'll tell you a quick version now," Eric said.

"Tell us too," Shelley, Dani and Jeffy said at almost the same time.

Eric chuckled. "Gather around."

✝✝✝

January 22nd 9:00 AM Wednesday Morning

UCLA Campus, Los Angeles, California

"Good practice," Agent Joon Kim said with a smile as Jordan approached him after her morning practice.

Jordan smiled. "Thanks."

"That pitch is very good. Your fastball is amazing, but that changeup, you have them all looking silly."

Jordan grinned. "Wow. Well, thank you very much. How do you know about softball, Agent Kim?"

"My best friend from college was coach for South Korean national team. I see many games and practice."

His expression changed and he stepped in front of Jordan. "May I help you?"

Jordan looked past the agent and rolled her eyes.

"I came to talk to the girl."

"Does she know you?"

"Agent Kim," Jordan said. "This guy is Mason Cole. He's a student here at the college."

The agent looked him over. "Student friend, or student foe?"

Jordan gave a soft laugh. "TBD."

"TBD? Sorry I don't know this TBD."

"To be determined," she said, then turned to Mason. "Mason, I'm pretty sure the last we spoke, I told you I didn't want to speak to you anymore."

Before Mason could even answer Agent Kim butted in. "Why did you not want to speak to him?"

Jordan smiled at the look of irritation on Mason's face and then answered Kim's question. "He has this idea that Three isn't good enough for me. That because he can't be here with me all the time then he doesn't care about me. Mason here says that he's gonna wait until Three and I break up and then he's gonna be my boyfriend, or something absurd like that."

Agent Kim's brow furrowed as he tried to understand. He looked at Mason. "Well,

then sir, this sound like obsession. I believe she already told you that she is not interested in further contact, so, take off." He gestured abruptly with his thumb over his shoulder.

"You can't tell me what to do. I have a right to stand here if I want."

Jordan laughed. "Good. You stand there. We'll leave." Jordan turned to head up toward the sidewalk and Mason made the mistake of reaching out and grabbing her wrist.

Before he knew what was happening, he was on his back, moaning.

Kim looked down at him. "You are warned. Don't touch her. Don't even approach her."

Mason rose up and watched as Jordan and her new bodyguard headed up toward the building. The new agent was not easy-going or laid back. He seemed to be even more arrogant than the others. He definitely put a damper on Mason's plans. But that's okay, because he was a patient guy.

✝✝✝

January 22nd 12:00 PET, Wednesday Noon

Ministerio de la Iglesia de Jesús, Tarapoto, Peru

Miguel Rojas Alvarez walked quietly down the hallway carrying a tray of food. He stopped and knocked softly on the door of the one bedroom in the back of the church.

"Yes, yes, come in," Lev said cheerfully.

Miguel opened the door and poked his head in. "Brother Lev, allin sukha," he said cheerfully in the Quechua language.

Lev smiled and nodded his head. "Dobryy den'," he answered in Russian.

Miguel nodded. "Dobryy den'," he repeated.

Both men smiled and then reverted to their common language, which was English, though a bit of a broken English.

"Are you feeling much better?" Miguel asked.

"Yes, thank you."

"I brought you some food," Miguel said as he set the tray down on a small wooden table.

"You are still very kind, Miguel. How can I ever thank you?"

"You can agree to come with me."

"Come with you? Where are you going?" Lev asked as he eyed the delicious Ají de gallina, a stewed chicken with yellow chili. His eyes lit up. "You brought my favorite."

Miguel nodded. "To lift your spirits." He nodded toward the plate. "Eat before it gets cold."

He watched as Lev quickly bowed his head, blessed the food and picked up his fork. He smiled. "Tell me, Miguel, where are you going?"

Miguel sighed. "I had a dream last night. Now that you are well, I believe we must go to America. I saw us sitting together on a plane. I saw the flight path of the plane. It headed north into the southeast part of the United States and then turned left and headed to California. It was very clear. You and I, together."

Lev chewed and swallowed and smiled at his friend. “Okay.”

Miguel frowned. “Okay? That’s it?”

Lev grinned. “I too had a dream, my brother. I saw you and I standing together in front of a very beautiful home, white, with large red doors. The doors opened and the man, Grandmaster Eric Kino, he was standing in the doorway, smiling and inviting us in.”

Miguel grinned. “That’s an amazing dream, Lev. So, it appears the Lord is telling us to go to visit the man. Now, we just have to figure out how to make that happen. I already did a little research. A ticket from here to Los Angeles will cost over five thousand soles each.”

Lev nodded. “In his book he states that his business is doing well and he is blessed. Perhaps he would pay our way,” Lev said.

Miguel sighed. “It’s hard to ask a stranger for money.”

“Well, maybe we won’t have to actually ask him. Let’s reach out to him just to let him know that we both have had the same experience as him and see what he has to say.”

Miguel nodded. “When would you like to make the call?”

Lev smiled. “No time like the present.”

Miguel laughed. “Well, finish your lunch. I have to speak to a few women who want to handle a church fundraiser. They should be here any minute. And then, let’s make the call.”

“Do you have his number?” Lev asked.

“No, but I think I can get it from my friend in the States. Or he can research it for me.”

“Okay. You go have your meeting and call your friend and when you’re ready to make the call, let me know.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

✝✝✝

January 22nd 12:00 EST, Wednesday Noon

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Sheriff Tyson Stewart made his way up the steps of the giant front porch of the Inn. He opened the door and stepped inside and Wendy, the day manager came to greet him.

“Hey, Sheriff! What brings you to the Inn today?”

Ty sighed and frowned. “I’m lookin’ for John. Is he around?”

“Yes sir, I believe he’s in the kitchen. Your brother just brought him a chest full of steaks.”

Ty nodded. “Cool. Is Chaz still here?”

“Yes he is. You want me to go tell them you’re here, or do you just wanna go on into the kitchen?”

“Do me a favor and tell both of them that I’ll be in John’s office waiting to speak with them.”

“Yes sir. Sounds like it’s not good news.”

Ty shrugged. “It’s hard news. But a good thing.”

Wendy frowned and turned to deliver the message. Ty made his way back to the Inn's office and stood looking out the window. He didn't wait long before Chaz Stewart and John Appel came in.

"Brother," Chaz said. "Everything okay?"

Ty nodded and shook both Chaz and John's hands. "I'll get straight to the point. A hunter this past weekend out in Barnes County was out about a mile from the house where Deetz held Hannah. His dogs would not relent from one area and he decided to dig where they were hollerin'. It was the remains of a person. We just got tests back. It's Alicia Brown."

Chaz and John both nodded.

"Well," John began. "This is good. We can have a funeral and lay her to rest respectfully. It might give Hannah some closure."

"Yes, and there were some gloves with the body. Man's gloves. They've lifted Carl Deetz' DNA from them."

"So, that pretty much makes the case a slam dunk," Chaz said.

Ty nodded. "Pretty much, but Hannah will still have to testify."

"Well, she's gettin' stronger everyday," John said. "She'll do fine."

"When do you expect the trial to take place?" Chaz asked.

Ty sighed. "Well, now that we have the body, it should take place within the next two months."

John nodded. "Good. Let's get it over with."

Ty sniffed the air. "So, is uh, Miss Lily cooking lunch right now?"

"No, that's our staff cooking lunch following Lily's menus of course. Would you like to have a bit of lunch before you leave?"

"Ya know what? I would. I missed breakfast this morning."

"Why'd ya miss breakfast? Jenny go out of town?" John asked.

Tyson smiled slyly. "No, she's just not feeling too well right now."

"Oh, Ty, I'm sorry," Chaz said. "Is it serious?"

Ty nodded with a sigh. "It is."

"Can you talk about it?" John asked.

"Well, I'm not supposed to talk about it until we get past the three month mark because she's afraid it'll jinx it."

It took the men a moment.

Chaz' eyes opened wide. "Really, bro?" Chaz said excitedly. "Finally. But, I thought she couldn't have any children."

Ty nodded. "That's right. So, it's like a miracle."

John grinned. "Oh, man, Ty, I'm so freakin' happy for you."

Chaz had to choke back the emotions. "Bro, this is wonderful."

"It really is. It is so very wonderful. Just keep us in your prayers so that she'll carry the baby all the way to term."

"We definitely will. Man, oh man, Ty," Chaz exclaimed. "I am so stoked for you. I feel like I could dance a jig."

"Thanks, Chaz."

John slapped Ty on the back. “Well, I too am stoked for you and Jenny, Ty. Come on into the kitchen and let’s get some lunch.”

“Remember guys, it’s supposed to be a secret,” Ty said.

“You can trust us,” John said. “Well, I mean, you can trust me.”

Chaz chuckled. “You can trust me too. I don’t wanna be blamed for blabbing it and have Jenny all mad at me. Besides, I owe sweet Jenny for saving Lisa all those years ago.”

“Thanks guys. Just think, I’m finally gonna have a kid and here I am in my late forties.”

“Well, you can handle it,” Chaz said. “I’m about to be fifty with two three-month olds. You’re younger than me. If I can handle it, you’ll do just fine. As a matter of fact, Ty, you’re gonna be an awesome father.”

Ty cleared his throat of emotion.

John slapped him on the back again. “Let’s go eat.”

✝✝✝

January 22nd 10:00 PST Wednesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Billy sat listening carefully as his great grandson and his wife together got out the story of Cam’s life thus far.

Billy sat in a comfy oversized leather accent chair, leaning slightly forward his forearms resting on his knees, his hands folded together.

Cam and Jeffy sat on the beige sofa, Jeffy in the corner nursing Eli with a blanket over her shoulder.

“And then this little guy came into the world right after the challenge while we were at a restaurant, and we couldn’t be happier,” Cam said. “Or, at least, I didn’t think I could be happier. But today, today is a day I’ll never forget and I am so happy to meet you Granddad. I can’t even tell you.”

“Ach, me too, son. Me too. And Cameron, the things you’ve accomplished, well, they are nothing short of spectacular. First, even without the support of your parents, you made good grades in school, you played sports, you played football well enough to go to play in college. But even better, you saved this little lass in the woods. You turned yourself into a man, protected this girl and married her. Good for you!”

Jeffy giggled. “Good for me!”

Billy nodded. “And you’re good for him. And Cameron, you are more than just a man, you are a warrior, a mighty warrior. I am so pleased. Just so pleased.”

“Thank you, Granddad. Grandfather. And like, I’m pleased too. My great grandfather is one of the twelve. That is a mighty calling. I have so much honor and respect for Grandmaster Kino, and here you are, my own kin, is like him, called personally by God’s angel to do a great work.”

“Well, son, my work is the same and yet different from Eric’s. Eric is an amazing man. He has accomplished so much. He was called to teach the world and that is exactly what he’s doing, in his own way. My calling has remained local, in my little corner of the world. I simply counsel people on their relationships.”

"What kind of relationship counseling?" Jeffy asked. "Like marriage counseling?"

"Yes, that and more. Any kind of relationship. For example, if you had a problem with your mother, or if you and your siblings don't get along, or if you don't have any friends, etcetera."

Jeffy nodded.

"So, how is your marital relationship?" he asked, a twinkle in his eye.

Cam smiled. "We have a wonderful relationship now. But we didn't always, though I already told you about how I felt inferior."

Billy nodded. "And then you discovered you only needed to be a strong man with confidence."

"I needed to be more than that. I needed to learn to serve God first. I needed to respect myself by working hard. I needed to be humble enough to accept Jeffy's mind superiority and work with it."

"He did all those things," Jeffy added. "He worked so hard and became so strong so that I could do nothing except respect and admire him. And I discovered that having him be so strong where I knew I could depend on him to take care of me, it allowed me to relax my mind, relax and let him take over and lead. It's a beautiful thing."

"It is indeed. I see you have no need for relationship advice. Not between the two of you. But let's talk about your parents, Cameron and let's think about their attitude toward you. What do you think was the problem where they had no interest in your life?"

Cam shook his head. "I could never really figure it out. I always wondered what was wrong with me, ya know? What was I doing that was so bad that they wanted nothing to do with me. It took me a long time to get up enough confidence to consider that maybe it wasn't me. Grandmaster Kino helped me to see that."

Billy nodded. "Well, you're right. It wasn't you."

"Well, Granddad, now that you tell me why my father was here in the US all alone, maybe he felt abandoned himself. Only, he was the one that refused to go with the family back to Scotland and he was the one who cut off all communication, right?"

Billy nodded. "Yes. And it broke my heart. Still, the reason a person, especially a young person just out of high school, has for cutting off ties with their families sometimes, or most times, has to do with they want to do something that they know their parents won't approve of. So, Malcolm wanted to live a lifestyle unlike what his father Oliver taught him. You told me he never really mentioned God your whole life, right?"

"Right. Not one time that I can remember."

"So, possibly, our Malcolm wanted to head in another direction and knew his family would disapprove. That would explain why he would cut them off, but it doesn't explain why he wouldn't want to be involved in your life. It's hard for me to help explain without talking to your father."

"Well Grandmaster Kino spoke to him a few times. Maybe he can tell you something about it."

Billy nodded. "I'll ask him. So, you have absolutely no idea where your father may be?"

"No, but actually I can find out. If the phone number Ameritech found on him is legit, I can have it traced and find him."

"You can do that?"

"Yes sir."

"Then, may I ask why you haven't?"

Cam sighed and nodded his head slowly. "It was like, I finally overcame my abandonment issues. I'm doing well and I figured if he doesn't want to see me or meet his grandson, then I will leave that alone. No need to put myself through any more pain."

Billy nodded. "That makes sense."

Cam smiled. "Though I have to say, I may not have completely overcome my issues, because I didn't realize just how much I wanted to be connected to my blood kin until you were standing there in front of me telling me you were my great grandfather. It all came back, like, in a rush."

"I could see that," Billy said softly and then grinned. "So, then, how would you feel about us hunting down Malcolm?"

Cam smiled. "With you by my side, I think it would be great fun."

Billy laughed.

"And my mother is coming this Saturday. Will you still be here?"

"I'll be here as long as the Lord tells me to be here, and I'm thinking it's gonna be for quite a while."

"I'm so glad to hear that," Cam said, then turned when Jeffy moaned.

"Uh oh," Jeffy said. She pulled Eli from under the blanket where he'd fallen asleep and handed him to his father.

"What's wrong?" Cam asked.

"Um, I think Desi's in labor. I need to call her."

"Please, go ahead," Billy said. "I would love to hear this firsthand."

Jeffy nodded and placed the call.

"Hello Dr. Wallace," Desi said softly.

"How far apart are the contractions?"

"They are fifteen minutes apart and are getting much stronger. They started about twenty minutes apart three hours ago, and then went down to fifteen minutes apart regularly for the last two hours. I called my doctor and she said to go ahead and call Alec, which I just did. He's on his way home to pick me up."

"Good. Have you called your mom yet?"

"No ma'am."

"Okay. Be quiet for just a minute and let me read you."

Jeffy closed her eyes for several seconds. "Okay, sweetie, baby is in good position, head down. Yep, he's gonna be born today for sure. You're doing great. Go ahead and call your mom and sister. I'll tell Bree and she'll get the info texts going out to everyone and Taylor will call in Gabe's prayer warriors and I'll meet you at the hospital."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Wallace. I already feel so much better."

"Yep. No worries sweetie. It's gonna be an awesome day!"

She ended the call and smiled up at Billy. “So, sorry, but I have to go.”

Cam rose. “Which means I have to go, because whenever possible, I go where Jeffy goes, because, well, she’s a hot commodity and needs someone to watch her six at all times.”

Billy nodded.

Jeffy turned to Cam. “I’ll get mom to watch Eli.” She looked back at Billy. “I’m sorry I have to rush off. I didn’t say anything when I came in, Mr. Wallace, but dad heard from another of the twelve this morning and I’m sure he wants to tell you about it. He already told the Quinns while you and Cam were visiting.”

Billy’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that *is* wonderful. Yes, I do indeed want to hear about it!” He shook his head. “Well, now, it seems there is never a dull moment around here, is there?”

“Almost never,” Cam said. “And I love it.”

✝✝✝

January 22nd, 11:00 AM PST, Wednesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Dani Quinn stood on the back deck of the Kino estate, gazing out toward the ocean. She felt so much peace and contentment, it seemed surreal. Down on the second tier of the backyard, Melody, the Kinos young helper, and Shelley stood near a giant trampoline, helping the five Kino children to learn how to jump safely. The children pulled their mother onto the tramp and she laid down and they jumped all around her. Dani smiled. Such a lovely family.

Her eyes traveled farther down to the beach to another pleasant scene. Three men, all of different nationalities stood in a small circle. Each had a hand on the other’s shoulder and their heads were bowed in prayer. They’d been like that for several minutes. It made her heart swell to think of the power of these special men working together, asking God what He would have them do. They didn’t yet know what their big purpose was, but they knew it was important.

Shelley made her way up to the upper deck to stand next to Dani and gaze at the same beautiful sight.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” Shelley asked.

“It is,” Dani said softly. “It makes my heart feel like it could burst.”

Shelley nodded. “I feel the same way.” She sighed. “Aren’t we so blessed to be married to such wonderful men?”

“We really are,” Dani agreed.

Down on the beach all three men raised their heads when Eric got a call and pulled his phone from his pocket. His brow furrowed. He answered the call and put it on speaker.

“Grandmaster Holt, is there a problem?”

The man on the other end chuckled. “I knew you would think that.”

Eric smiled. “Well, I don’t often get a call from the national general manager of *Kino Martial Arts* unless there is a problem.”

“I suppose you’re right. We should remedy that, though I’m sure you have enough

on your plate without me calling you just to shoot the breeze."

"I suppose you're right. So, what can I do for you, sir?"

"Actually, I'm calling to give you some information. I received a call today from someone looking to communicate with you. He's actually one of our Masters at a studio in El Paso, Texas, Master Flores. He has a contact who lives in Peru, a man named Miguel Rohas Alvarez. The man asked Master Flores to reach out to you. He said that Mr. Alvarez and another man, a Russian man, have both discovered that they have had a similar experience as you had in the cave and they would like to speak to you."

"Did you give them my number?" Eric asked.

"No sir. Instead I got Mr. Alvarez' number and told Master Flores that I would have you reach out to Mr. Alvarez."

"Good. Shoot it to me in a text."

"Yes sir."

"Hmm, Jared, do you happen to know what time is it in Peru right now?"

"They are three hours in front of you, so it is 2:11 in the afternoon."

"Perfect. Thank you so much, Grandmaster Holt. I appreciate your quick action on this subject."

"It's my pleasure, sir. Have a great day."

"It's an awesome day, Jared. And by the way, you're doing a fine job."

"Thank you, sir. I am in my element, so that makes it easy."

Eric ended the call and smiled at Alo and Billy. "Would you two like to accompany me to the study and listen in on this phone call?"

"Ach, I'm so happy you asked, so that I didn't have to ask you."

Eric chuckled. "Let's go." He looked at Alo. "Are you good?"

"Oh, yes, perhaps a bit tired of standing." He chuckled. "Ho, I never thought I would say that."

Eric smiled and nodded. "Here, take my arm. You have a ways to go before your leg muscles get strong."

Billy held out his arm too, and they escorted Alo up the long set of steps to the lower deck and then up again to the house.

✝✝✝

Alo Quinn and Billy Wallace each sat in a chair in front of Eric's desk as he placed the call. They smiled as they listened to the phone ring in a place four thousand miles away.

"Allianchu?" [Ah-yee-yahn-choo] Miguel answered with a question and with excitement, because he didn't recognize the number and he truly hoped it was whom he thought it was.

"Hello," Eric said heartily. "Have I reached Miguel?"

"Oh, yes, yes, this is Miguel!"

"Miguel this is Eric Kino."

"Praise God, Grandmaster Kino. I'm so happy to be talking to you."

"The feeling is mutual, Miguel. I didn't recognize your greeting when you answered the phone. May I ask what language that was?"

"Oh, yes, 'allianchu', that is how to say 'hello' in Quechua, which is a language of some of the native people, the indigenous people of Peru."

"Interesting," Eric said. "Is that your main language?"

"It and Spanish. But I also speak English, though sometimes I misunderstand the uh, the, I think it's called slang."

"Yes, I understand," Eric said. "Well, I also speak Spanish, so if we need to, we can change to that to clear up any misunderstanding."

"For now, English is good," Miguel affirmed.

"Wonderful. And before we get started on the purpose of this conversation, I want to let you know that there are two of my newest, yet dear friends sitting here with me. Will that be okay with you?"

"Yes, because I too have a dear friend sitting with me. His name is Lev Vasilyev. He is Russian but speaks English even better than I do."

"Lev, it's nice to meet you," Eric said.

"You as well, Grandmaster Kino," Lev answered.

"And I have here, Alo Quinn, who is an American Indian, an indigenous person, from here in the United States."

"Hello, Alo," both Miguel and Lev said together.

"Ha-we'," Alo said with a grin. "That's hello in my native language as Quapaw."

"Haweee," Miguel and Lev repeated.

Eric chuckled. "And also here with me is Billy Wallace, and he's visiting from Scotland."

"Hello," Billy said quickly. "That's how we say it," he added, making everyone laugh.

"So, Miguel, I was told that you and Lev have had a similar experience to my miraculous experience in the cave."

"Yes sir, we have," Miguel said.

"May I ask how you came to know about my experience," Eric asked.

"Yes. There is a man here in Peru whom I have known my whole life. His name is Albert Flores. We grew up together. He has a grandson who lives in the states, Alex Flores, who is an instructor at one of your *Kino Martial Arts* schools in Texas. Alex has recently read your book of memoirs and remembered a story his grandfather shared about me and thought the story was familiar. He sent a Spanish version of the book to his grandfather, who, in turn, shared it with me."

"I see. Well, that book has been out for a few years. I was reluctant to even publish it, but as always, God has a plan."

"I agree," both Miguel and Lev said.

"And I'm curious, Lev," Eric began. "You said you are from Russia. That's a long way from Peru. How did you meet Miguel?"

"Well," Lev began. "That's actually quite a story."

"I have time if you do," Eric prodded.

"Hmm, let me see if I can shorten it a bit." Lev paused. "Hmm, okay, well, I lived in Abakan, Russia. It was quite a difficult life. I lost everyone in my family. My parents

died a long time ago, when they were close to my current age."

"Lev, may I ask how old you are?" Eric interrupted.

"Oh, yes, I'm seventy-five."

"Awesome. Thank you. Sorry for interrupting. Just getting some perspective. Please go ahead."

Lev gave a soft laugh. "No worries. My father died of lung cancer. My mother died of heart disease. I had two older brothers. We all came of age late sixties, early seventies, during the Cold War with the US. Russia also invaded Czechoslovakia around that time. My brothers both died before the age of twenty-two in that war."

"I'm so sorry," Eric said softly.

Lev drew a breath. "Thank you. I, on the other hand, went to work for the Russian government. I had certain skills that my father had taught me. Survival skills. Both wilderness survival and urban survival."

"How did your father know these skills?" Billy asked.

Lev sighed. "My grandfather taught him. He thought he was passing on his skills and knowledge for the good of his son, but because of those skills, my father got sucked into the KGB. He had no way out that he could see other than death or the death of his kids. Though it didn't save my brothers after all, did it?"

He stopped and drew a deep breath. "I taught survival skills to Soviet agents and soldiers from the 1970s to 1991. Then the KGB ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. But the FSB took over, with Putin at the head. I was released from my position. All during the years that I taught, I tried to also teach about Jesus. It was difficult. Religion seemed to be just a status act for most of the people where I lived. I tried to help them to see that it wasn't a religion. They didn't have to go to the big fancy church. They simply needed to build a relationship with Christ, because He was indeed real. Once I was released from my civic duty, I began to teach this full time. I was forty years old.

"Teaching about Jesus was how I met my wife. My beautiful and sweet Tatiana. She was twenty-five and so full of life and a little bit of mischief. We had four children. Three boys and one girl. We were happy. Life was happy. We had our own little congregation. We would meet up in the hills near my family home, the home I grew up in.

"This went on for almost twenty years, until I was sixty. But then, someone wasn't happy about me teaching Christianity. I actually think it was the Bishop of the Orthodox church. I guess he didn't want me drawing people away from his diocese. He reported me to the FSB as a traitor. He told them I was pretending to teach about Christ but was instead teaching guerrilla warfare to the young people of our country. They came after me. I was put in prison for several years. When I got out, I was seventy and I got out to a nightmare."

He cleared his throat. "I found that in my absence, my family had been constantly harassed. My daughter, only eighteen when I was imprisoned, was raped by two politsiya. Her brothers sought out the officers that did this and killed one of them. All three of my boys were put on trial and sentenced to life in prison. There is no death penalty, nevertheless, my boys all died in knife fights inside the prison, one at a time.

This caused my daughter, little Marina, to feel such loneliness and despair that she walked in front of a train and died.

"When I got out, I found my beautiful Tatiana in such a state. Thin. Sick. Heartbroken. She told me she tried to pray, to talk to God. She didn't give up. She was dying. Her frail body was giving out and on her death bed, she told that the politsiya told her that when I got out of prison, they were going to hunt me down and put me to death. She begged me to leave. Of course, I couldn't leave her. I wanted to go to God with her. But she begged me to promise her. I withheld that promise for several weeks, but it was her dying wish and I finally promised her that I would leave Russia.

"The day she was put in the ground, I made arrangements and flew to the State of Acre in Brazil. My father had a place there, in the wilderness of the Amazonian Rainforest. But when I got there, I heard that there had been men there looking for me. So, I gathered all my survival tools and packs, and headed into the Amazon. I lived along the Amazon River for the past four years. It was a lonely time, no human contact, but a time when I drew very close to the Lord, it was as if he was walking beside me.

He stopped and smiled. "Actually though, I did have human contact, just not face to face. Except for one little guy." He stopped talking.

"Lev, are you still there?" Eric asked.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry. My mind went back to that time and then I realized I said it would be a short version."

"Well you can't stop there," Alo encouraged.

"I agree," Eric said. "Tell us about the little guy?"

Lev laughed. "I came into contact with what they call, 'the uncontacted'."

"You mean like an Amazon uncontacted tribe?" Eric verified.

"Yes, though I really didn't come into contact with them face to face. When I realized they were in the area, I would leave them some gifts. A string of fish. Some fruit. They began to leave me things, a basket, some eagle feathers, a stick, which I think was a digging tool.

"I didn't attempt to make contact because that would only endanger them. But one day I was fishing near some rapids and I heard yelling. It was a child in the water, yelling at me. I tossed my pole onto the shore behind me and dove into the water. God was with me that day. I was able to swim fast enough to grab the child before he was swept downstream, find my footing, and half walk-half swim to the bank. He was obviously one of the tribe and he was just jabbering away at me.

"Through gestures, I got him to understand that I wanted to get him back to his people. He actually took my hand and we half walked-half ran through the forest and that was hard. Remember, he was a little boy with loads of energy and I was a seventy-four year old man. When we got to what I think were lookouts, he ran ahead of me and one of them bent and scooped the boy up. He pointed back at me. I gave them a nod of my head and a slight bow and turned and left quickly.

"I didn't see them again, but the gifts flowed in. Fish, baskets, pots, tools. Fruit. Jewelry made from teeth and feathers." He stopped and sighed.

"And then, one fateful day, again, I was fishing the rapids. I was standing at the

edge of a very high fall and again I heard shouting and yelling, but this time it was men, and they were yelling in Russian. I quickly tossed my pole to the side and dove into the water, I stayed under by skimming the surface and taking breaths until I thought they were gone.

"I slowly raised up, I didn't see them anywhere. I was worried about the tribe and glanced around to make sure I saw no sign of them. I went to the edge of the fall to look down to make sure they weren't gathered around at the pool. One shot rang out. I guess I moved at just the right time and it hit me in the shoulder. I knew they wouldn't be satisfied with that, so I held my hands over my upper abdomen and pretended to die, throwing myself over the fall.

"The next thing I knew I was on a travois [truh·voy] being drug through the forest. There was a poultice covered with leaves on my shoulder and I was burning up with fever. This seemed to go on for days, but I'm not sure. I lost track of time. At one point, only two of the tribe pulled me through an opening and left me near a small village. One of them approached the village and spoke with a modern man who came out and looked me over.

"That man and one other drug me into the village. The next morning, four men took me on another journey and we emerged near a modern town. I was then loaded into the back of a truck and transported to a city and then to this very church where I am as we speak. Miguel is the pastor of this fine church and he has given me his bed and nursed me back to health. And I guess that is about as short as I can make the story."

There was a few moments of silence before anyone spoke.

"Well, Lev," Eric began. "My heart and spirit hurt for you and the pain you've endured in your life, but my warrior self cheers for you for what you've overcome and not given up and are still pressing on."

"Thank you, Grandmaster Kino. I will continue to serve the Lord the best I can until He takes me and I am very much looking forward to seeing my Tatiana again, and sweet Marina, Mark, Daniil, and David."

"Those are the names of your children?" Billy asked.

"Yes sir."

Eric smiled. He too will feel much joy for Lev when he is reunited with his family. "So, Miguel and Lev," Eric began, "you say you both have had a similar experience as what I described in my memoirs."

"Yes, we did," Miguel said.

"I want to hear the stories, if you don't mind sharing."

"Don't mind at all," Miguel said.

"Would you allow me to record them as you tell them?"

"Record?"

"Yes. You see, it has recently been shown to me that I was not the only one whom, at ten years of age went missing for three days and had an angel come and speak to me. The Lord has shown me that there are twelve, and you Miguel and Lev, are number ten and eleven."

"Opa!" Lev said.

"The two men here with me, Alo and Billy, they too have had a similar experience," Eric explained. "Because there are so many, I have begun recording the stories and am having them transcribed so that each of you can read the stories of the others."

"Eso es maravilloso," Miguel uttered in Spanish. "That is wonderful."

"So, Miguel, where were you living and who did you live with when your experience happen?" Eric said, just to get him talking.

"I was right here in Tarapoto," Miguel began. "I too am seventy-five, so it was sixty-five years ago. My grandparents were Catholics, but my own parents felt moved to strike out on their own. They still worshiped, but felt they were being led in a closer relationship with God through their own interpretations of the gospel. This opened my mind to thinking that God can speak to us in many ways. I've always been thankful that my parents were seeking God and a relationship with Him rather than just attending a church and doing what they thought must be done to achieve their own salvation. They wanted to serve God, to interact with Him, and that has been so helpful to me in my journey with God."

Eric, Billy, Alo and Lev listened quietly as Miguel told his story. At the story's end, no one was ashamed of the tears they shed. It was a beautiful and poignant story. They weren't tired of the story telling when it became Lev's turn. They listened intently to his story as well. The stories were different, Miguel's happening in the mountains of Peru, and Lev's happening traveling on the Trans-Siberian Railway."

"Well then," Eric said softly when Lev finished his telling. "Those are amazing stories. How beautiful and amazing and of course, it makes me wonder, what does the Lord have in store for us? How are we going to be able to serve Him, the twelve of us together? I'm so intrigued. We have been honed in the fire, though some of the fires have been much hotter than others. How I would love to meet you two in person as I have met Billy and Alo and Ronald. When we are standing together and praying, it's very surreal, powerful, and I have a strong feeling that the twelve of us are supposed to gather together."

"Aye, that's why I traveled from Scotland a few days ago. I knew I was supposed to be here," Billy said.

Alo smiled and nodded.

Eric cleared his throat. "I don't suppose you two, Miguel and Lev, would be interested in taking an extended trip?"

Miguel smiled and Lev winked at him.

"We were actually thinking along those lines," Miguel said. "Only we don't have the means. My little church here is struggling to keep her doors open, and Lev, of course, presumed dead, has no access to his bank accounts."

"The expense will be completely covered," Eric immediately assured.

"That is generous of you," Miguel said quickly. "Honestly, we were hoping for that offer. But still, there might be other problems. For example, Lev cannot travel on his own passport for it will be flagged."

Eric nodded. "I think we can handle that. Either with a pseudo passport and maybe

even a private jet ride, or both."

"That would be quite expensive," Lev said.

"The expense involved is inconsequential. Please don't give it another thought. The Lord has blessed us and will continue to do so as long as I use those blessings to do His work. I feel strongly that I am supposed to do whatever it takes to make this happen ASAP. When will you be able to travel?" Eric asked.

"Well," Miguel began. "If a car drove up right now and told us to get in, we'd be in that car."

Eric chuckled. "I like the way you think. Good. So, here's a preliminary plan. Handle who will take care of the church while you are gone. Do you have an assistant Pastor?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. So, make arrangements to go on an extended vacation. Pack your bags. I will wire you money, Miguel, to handle anything the church needs in your absence, so figure out a ball park figure and let me know."

"Ball park figure?"

"Oh, um, that means a rough estimate. I will make inquiries about the best way to transport you and get back to you. Lev, are you healthy enough to travel?"

"Yes, though still a little weak."

"Well, when I get you here, my daughter will fix you up. Until then, go slow and don't push it." He didn't wait for an answer. "Now, after you do all of this, take time to read the other stories which I will be sending you in just a few minutes. I am very much looking forward to our meeting."

"Us too," Miguel said. "Very much. Truly, it feels like a whirlwind, like everything happening so fast."

Eric smiled and Alo chuckled.

"That's how he works," Alo said quickly. "I think his motto is 'no time like the present.'"

Eric nodded. "One of many mottos I have. And now that we have a plan of bringing two more here to the states, Alo and Billy, I certainly hope you two will stick around."

"You couldn't force me away," Billy said.

Eric sighed. "And I just had the Lord put something else on my heart. I'm going to reach out to the others we know of, Ces Iman in Australia, and Henrik Johansen in Norway, Sakchai Chen is in Thailand, and Thomas Sawyer, who is currently in Georgia, I'm gonna reach out and see if they might consider a little get together. And of course, Ronald Clark, who is right here near me in California. There is another, Andrew Musani, who is already planning to come here next week. He's coming from Uganda. Yes, I think I'll set this all in motion as soon as I get your travel plans together, Miguel and Lev."

"So that means we would have eleven out of the twelve," Lev said. "Do you know who the twelfth man is, Grandmaster Kino?"

"No, not yet, but at this rate, we might know very soon."

"This is all very exciting," Miguel said.

"I agree. Okay, let's have a prayer and get to work," Eric said.

The five men all bowed their heads.

✝✝✝

Habakkuk 2:3

"For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay."

Chapter Twenty-One

January 22nd, 4:00 PM EST Wednesday Late Afternoon
Whitmore Real Foods Supermarket, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily and Justice wondered around the largest grocery store in Pine Forest. She was showing him all of the *Pure Foods Brands* that her family had personally requested over the years and the store had begun to carry. Slowly but surely, the store manager was seeing that Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace's protocols were catching on and people were looking for pure foods and they didn't want to have to go into Macon or Atlanta to find them. They were coming into Pine Forest to what used to be called Whitmore Grocery and is now Whitmore Real Foods Supermarket.

Lily pulled on Justice's arm. "And over here, see? At one time they didn't even know what hummus was and now they have all of these varieties, all organic and pure. Of course, I like to make my own with lots of fresh garlic and peppers."

Justice smiled. "You're making me hungry."

She giggled. "I'm making myself hungry. Let's check out and I'll go get started on dinner."

"Okay, but I'd like to swing down Main Street a minute and see how things are going."

She nodded. "As long as you don't wanna stop and go in because I have ice cream in this cart."

"Well, we wouldn't wanna let that get ruined."

They checked out and Justice insisted on paying. The cashier, Mindy, was a girl Lily went to school with and she introduced Justice and they chatted a minute, Lily explaining to her that Justice was one of the owners of the *Pure Foods Company* and she was showing him how Whitmore had changed.

They headed out of the store and started across the parking lot when the manager of Whitmore came running out.

"Mr. Sawyer! Mr. Sawyer, may I speak to you a moment?"

Lily looked up to see who was calling. "That's the store manager. Mindy probably told him who you were."

Justice sighed. "Okay, well, let me go speak to him for a minute."

"No problem. You go do your thing. I'll head on out to the car, but don't take too long because..."

"Because you have ice cream," he said with a laugh. "I promise to be quick."

Justice ran back to the store and shook the hand of the manager, smiling kindly. Justice spoke amiably with him, commending him on the changes being made and congratulating him when he let Justice know that they were opening two new stores in neighboring counties.

Lily pushed the cart toward the car and looked up quickly at the roar of an engine. A car coming from the back of the lot sped right toward her and she hurried off to the side of the lane, but it was still coming right at her. Before she could react, the car hit her cart and her and screeched to a halt. Lily screamed just before the car struck her.

Justice saw what was about to happen and started running toward her. She flew up into the air at the impact and landed on the asphalt, moaning. He threw himself down at her side. "Lily, baby, Lily," he said.

She only moaned in pain.

He pulled his phone immediately and instead of calling 911, he called Jericho.

"Hey, buddy," Jericho answered.

"A car just hit Lily in the parking lot of Whitmores."

"On my way," Jericho said immediately. "I'll call her family, you talk to her."

Justice hung up and leaned over Lily. "Lily, can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes. "Yes."

"Where are you hurt?"

She moaned and reached for her right arm. "Ugh, hurts so much."

"Is she okay," a man asked. "I'm so sorry. It was so strange. The gas pedal went all the way down and got stuck. I couldn't stop and I couldn't steer. I'm so sorry, is she okay?"

"Well, she's alive," Justice said. "Not sure if she's okay."

A crowd had gathered around. "I've called 911," the manager said.

"Thanks, me too," Justice replied as he ran his hand over Lily's forehead.

She tried to sit up.

"No, just stay right there, baby," he said softly. "Relax. I've called Jericho."

Lily closed her eyes.

Justice put his hand on her head again and said a quick prayer. When he finished he spoke again. "Lily, open your eyes and talk to me, okay?"

She opened her eyes and smiled. "The ice cream is doomed."

He gave a soft laugh and then was extremely relieved to look up and see Jericho pull up in his black truck.

"Everyone back up and give me room, please," Jericho said immediately. "Paramedics will be here in two minutes," he said to Justice as he set his bag down, knelt over Lily and took her pulse.

A few minutes later, cops arrived, the ambulance arrived and Justice stood back and watched the rescue wheel turn. What was going on? It almost seemed as if there was someone or something out to get Lily. The librarian lady almost hit her, a guy on a bike almost hit her, a tree almost hit both of them, something pushed her down the stairs at the Sawyer house, and now this. The man who hit her was confused and swore it was like something took over his car. Funny thing was, Justice believed him.

Keegan and Daisy arrived and Lily was ensconced in their love and comfort, so he was surprised when she asked for him. He poked his head through the people circling her. "I'm right here, Lily. I won't leave you."

Justice and Keegan stood and spoke to Jericho who'd backed off and allowed the

paramedics to take over.

"What's the verdict, Jericho?" Justice asked.

"She's gonna be okay. She's a little shocky and might have a bit of a concussion. Her right arm is broken. Could've been a lot worse."

Justice nodded and glanced at Mr. Tanner. He was quiet, his jaw tense.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tanner. I wasn't with her. The manager of the store called me back to speak with me for a minute and Lily headed to the car by herself. The car came so fast, it was hard for Lily to react."

Keegan nodded. "It's not your fault, Justice, so stop blaming yourself."

Justice sighed. "Maybe it is my fault though. Maybe my presence in her life is the problem."

"If you're talking about the generational curse you're here to battle, then you can't give in to the dark side by letting them win. We will all fight it together. Removing yourself from Lily's life would only hurt her more. Stand up and fight, Justice. Don't give in."

Sighing, Justice nodded and hung his head. "You're absolutely right, sir. I guess it was a moment of weakness."

"I've had plenty of those. I'm sure I'll have plenty more." He sighed and smiled. "I'm gonna go comfort my wife. You follow Lily to the hospital while they set her arm and then bring her home for me."

Justice nodded. "Thank you, sir. I mean, for trusting me."

"She does, so I do. Don't disappoint me."

"No sir. I won't."

Jericho, having been privy to the private conversation, smiled. His admiration and respect for Keegan Tanner grew every single day he interacted with him. What a good, strong man. He could've been angry that Lily had been hurt while on Justice's watch. He could've told him to get the heck out of Lily's life, but instead, he kept a level and logical head and put blame where it should be, on the evil they were here to battle. Mr. Tanner probably didn't realize how much he teaches others how to be real men. He was actually a lot like Grandmaster Kino and Jericho found that very interesting indeed.

✝✝✝

January 22nd 6:00 PM Wednesday Evening

West Newport Women's Center, Newport, California

"Well," Jeffy said. "Cam and I are gonna head out. I'm so proud of you, Desi. You too, Alec. You both did so well and you have a beautiful, healthy seven and a half pound baby boy."

"Thank you, Dr. Wallace," Alec said. "For everything."

"My pleasure. Really. I just love you two so much."

"Hey," Cam said as he moved forward and shook Alec's hand. "Good job, dad. Do you know what you're gonna name him?"

Alec nodded. "Yes we do! Desi wants to name him after me. So, Alec, and then she also wanted to honor her father for making such a drastic change in himself, so Dustin, and I wanted to honor the Kinos for what they did for us, so, Kino." He smiled.

Cam frowned. “So, Alec Dustin Kino Morgan?”

Alec nodded. “A bit much for such a little guy, huh?”

“He’ll grow into it. Ya know, our Eli also has Kino in his name. He’s Elijah Cameron Kino Wallace. That kind of makes them related. You and I, Alec, if not for the Kinos, who knows where we’d be. Because of the Kinos, our two little guys, they’re gonna have so much love and security, and fathers that have learned from the best.”

Alec nodded. “I agree. And I’m still learning.”

“Aren’t we all,” Cam quipped.

“Well, bye kiddos. I’ll send your parents in again,” Jeffy said. She leaned over and kissed Desi’s head. “Call me if you need me, for anything, anytime.”

“Thank you, Dr. Wallace, I will.”

✝✝✝

January 22nd, 8:00 PM EST Wednesday Evening

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Almost the entire Tanner family sat around in the den after a delicious meal. Their discussion had centered around the genealogy of the Sawyer family and Heather was sitting on the floor with a notebook on the coffee table, writing everything down. Daisy sat over at the desk trying to get all the information into a genealogy app on her laptop. Nolan and Thomas Sawyer sat on the giant sofa along with Jericho and Rose and Justice with a sleeping Lily tucked up under his arm. CJ with a sleeping Isaiah against his chest, and Violet by his side, snuggled together on the loveseat, enjoying the conversation and the banter between Rose, and, well, Rose and everyone. Lizzy sat in her nursing chair, feeding Gentian. Keegan sat in his large recliner, Iris asleep on his lap.

“Okay, okay, wait, go back,” Daisy said. “I know I have the direct line down for both Delton who left Pine Forest and went to Kansas and Franklin who went to Tennessee, but you said all the siblings too fast. Go back to Delton. His siblings were Franklin, Walter and Harold, correct?”

“Yes,” Thomas answered quickly.

Heather nodded. “And then Delton married Cynthia and they had Delton Jr., and Sam and Mary and John and Birdie, right?”

“Right,” Thomas said, checking his own personal notebook.

“And then we only know that John married Sylvia. Do we know the lines of his siblings?”

“I have some of that information on my home computer,” Justice said. “But we focused on John, because, well, that was our line.”

“Okay, I get that,” Daisy said. “But I would love to research and find out what happened to all of Delton’s children.”

“Go for it,” Justice said with a grin.

“Isn’t it sweet though,” Violet began, “that Delton and Cynthia named one of their girls after Delton’s mother, Birdie?”

Everyone smiled. “That is sweet,” Rose admitted. “Isn’t it sweet that you would pick up on that.”

“That is sweet,” CJ answered. “Because that’s just how Violet is.”

Daisy nodded. “So, okay, then John Sawyer married Sylvia in 1885 and they had Delton III, Mae, Louise and William, and we don’t know about Mae, Louise or William, right?”

“Correct,” Justice said. “And the interesting thing there to me, is that Delton Jr, John’s older brother, didn’t use Delton the third for his own children, so maybe he didn’t have any children or maybe he died young.”

“Well that’s sad,” Lizzy said softly.

They all nodded.

Heather picked it up there. “That is sad. I really want to find out all of this stuff. Anyway, so then Delton the third married Ethel and they were your grandparents, right Mr. Sawyer?”

Thomas nodded. “That’s right. And they only had two children, Delton the fourth and Annie. And I know what happened to Annie. She was my aunt, and she was a nurse and she signed up to go overseas in the war.”

“Which war?” Daisy asked.

“WW2,” Thomas answered sadly. “She was killed by enemy fire while working in a medical camp.”

Keegan sighed and shook his head.

Both Heather and Daisy were writing or typing furiously as Thomas spoke. They looked up ready for his next words.

“And Delton the fourth, my father, was also in WW2 and he was an airman, actually, a flying Ace.”

“Wow, that’s cool,” CJ said.

Thomas smiled. “Yes, we were proud of him. He made it through the war and came home and married a wonderful lady named Lillian, my mother.” He stopped and smiled at the memory of his mother, and then went on. They had Delton the fifth, then me, then Henry and little Cate, whose name was Catherine.”

“And Catherine was the baby whom the angel saved and gave back to you after the tornado miracle,” Nolan said.

Thomas nodded.

“And Delton the fourth, your father, was a doctor, right?” Heather said.

Thomas smiled and nodded. “Correct.”

“What happened to Delton the fifth?” Keegan asked.

Thomas smiled. “My older brother was killed in Vietnam. My brother Henry rebelled against my father, I think because of me, and got all caught up in the sixties culture revolution, you know, the drugs and sex and crazy cults, and he died of a drug overdose.”

“Oh wow,” Rose said. “I’m so sorry. But if you don’t mind me asking sir, why do you think it was because of you?”

Thomas shrugged. “I guess I was trying so hard to do what the angel instructed me to do, you know, live righteously, live honorably, work hard even when I’m tired, etcetera, that it made it difficult for Henry to live up to the example I was setting. My father threw me up as an example all the time. I hated when he did that. It’s not the way

to help or teach a child. In some ways, I don't blame Henry for taking off."

Keegan sighed. "It's hard to get it right as a parent. We make mistakes."

"We sure do," Lizzy said softly. "What about baby Cate?" she asked. "Did she do well?"

Thomas smiled. "Our little Caty grew up and married a man named Roger Carter. We didn't see them often. I think they struggled financially but Roger was too proud to ask for help."

Jericho frowned. "If he was too proud, then how did you know they were struggling?"

"Well, we did see them every once in a while and Cate would speak to me and hint that all was not well. Being a doctor, my father had plenty of money and could have helped, but he insisted that Roger should come to him and ask like a man, and of course, that never happened. They lived in Garden City, Kansas, almost five hours away. Even though Cate and I didn't get together very often, we remained close in our hearts. She was only able to have one child, Joseph Carter who married a sweet girl named Sandy and they had four children; Dean, Dillon, Emma and Elizabeth, the youngest, who sadly, died at the age of eighteen from brain cancer."

"So, wait, we have some Carters here in Pine Forest!" Violet said.

"You do?" Thomas asked.

"Yes." Justice said. "I remember it's Joe, the one who owns Joe's Bar and Grill in town, right? Joe is a Carter."

"He's a Carter?" Thomas repeated.

"Yes, and he's Lisa Stewarts father," Rose said. "But I mean, the Carters have always been here, right Dad?"

"Well, I only know three generations of Carters. Joe, Lisa and her and Chaz' children. I haven't lived here long enough."

"Hold on a minute. I'm gonna call Laynah," Rose said. She put it on speaker.

"What's up, Rosey?" Laynah said.

"Hey Bugs, so, we're all sitting here going over the Sawyers genealogy and we just realized that Mr. Sawyer's baby sister married a Carter and we're just trying to see if the Carters have always been in Pine Forest, or did they move here from Kansas?"

"I think they've always been here. My dad knew Joe his whole life, and Grandpa Charles knew Joe's father and grandfather, because they talk about old times that involved them."

"Oh, okay."

"But did you say Carters from Kansas?"

"Yes, because that's where one of the sons of Knox Sawyer went to start fresh, and that's where Mr. Sawyer and Justice are from."

"Well, ya know, JoJo's mother, his biological mother, her last name was Carter and she was from Kansas."

"Oh wow, that's right. I'm gonna call JoJo. TTYL Bugs."

"Uh, bye."

Rose held up her finger and called JoJo Adams.

"Well, hello there, Miss Rose Tanner," JoJo said. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, all is well. I mean, Daisy got hit by a car today and broke her arm and hit her head, but she's okay."

"Oh, wow, I wasn't expecting that. So, we'll keep her in our prayers."

"Thanks, so, do you have a minute to talk?"

"Let's see, I'm setting up for youth night here at *Hopewood Chapel*, but I can squeeze in a few minutes. So, what's up?"

"Well, first, you're on speaker."

"Good to know, but the only one I'd say something funny about is Gabe, or you I guess, and Gabe's not there, so no fun. Who all is there?"

"My whole family except Gabe and all the boyfriends except Brody, and also Mr. Thomas Sawyer is here."

"Gotcha. So what can I do for you?"

"Well, JoJo we've been sitting here going over the Sawyer's genealogy, and as you know, one, like, um, branch of the Sawyers settled in Kansas, and Mr. Sawyer has a baby sister who grew up and married a man named, um, what was his name again," Rose asked.

"Roger Carter," Thomas said.

"Yeah, Roger Carter," Rose went on. "And like I said, they are in Kansas, and Bugs just reminded me that your mom was a Carter from Kansas, and so... well..."

"And so, you're wondering if I'm related to the Carters in Kansas and therefore to the Sawyers?"

"Right. So, did you know Roger Carter?"

"I don't think so. How old would Roger Carter be?"

"If he were alive he'd be around seventy-five," Thomas said. "But he died at the age of sixty in a car accident. He was married to my sister, Catherine."

"Catherine. Hmm, I know a Catherine, but they call her Caty. Caty Carter. She's my great grandmother."

Thomas' and Justice's eyes got big.

"Yes, we called her Caty, or Cate," Thomas said excitedly. "She had only one child, Joseph, and Joe married a girl named Sandy."

"Oh wow, you guys," JoJo said. "Sooo listen to this; I am named after my Grandfather, Joseph. And my grandmother is Sandy, and my mother's name was Beth, or I mean, Elizabeth, but I don't know her because she died from brain cancer right after I was born."

The entire group was silent.

It was Keegan who cleared his throat and spoke. "JoJo, there seems to be some absolutely amazing synchronicities taking place. What this means is that you are the great grandnephew of Thomas Sawyer, who is one of the twelve, who is sitting in my den with us because they are originally from Pine Forest. Their family once owned the old Sawyer house in town that your Uncle Ricky just recently purchased for Lily."

"Wow. Just wow," JoJo said softly. "So, I was told about the Sawyers being there to bring some light to the old house. Um, hold on. Yes sir. Yes, everything is okay, but

you have to hear this, Dad. I'm gonna put it on speaker. Okay, Rose, or Mr. Tanner or Mr. Sawyer, please tell my dad what we just discovered."

Everyone listened as Mr. Sawyer and Keegan Tanner retold the family history of the Sawyers and how JoJo was actually related. JoJo's great grandmother was the baby sister that Thomas Sawyer had held and lost in the tornado, and then was restored to him by the angel. It was an incredible story by itself. Add that to the fact that Mark Adams had a relationship with Caty's granddaughter, it was hard to fathom. But then Mark Adams said he had a story to tell also, and began to fill them in on Cam's relationship to Billy Wallace. Again, everyone was blown away.

When finally, the conversation came to an end and they got off the phone, Lily moaned and her eyes blinked open.

"There you are sleepyhead," Rose said.

Lily frowned and looked up into Justice's eyes. "Hi. Sorry I fell asleep."

"No problem. I think it was the medication they gave you."

She winced. "Well, Mom, can I have some more meds?"

Lizzy glanced at the time. "Yes, you're past due."

Justice rose, "I'll get them." He left the room and came back a minute later. He handed her a pill and a bottle of water.

Keegan sighed. "Well, amazing family, this has been an intriguing evening. But I imagine everyone is tired."

"Okay, Dad, but just one more thing, Heather said. "Why don't you ever talk about your family? I mean we know Papa Roger and Grandma Deb, and Aunt Shannon and Aunt Lauren and their husbands and kids. But, I mean, who were your grandfathers and grandmothers? And by the way, isn't it interesting that your father and Caty Carter's husband both have the same name."

Keegan nodded. "They are both Rogers. Interesting."

"So what about your family, Dad," Heather asked.

"Well, I wondered if any of you would ever ask me about them. Still, the reason I've never said anything all these years is because there is not much to say. My mom, Deborah Hunt was her maiden name, was raised in a group home when her mother left her in a restroom at a hospital. They never found the woman who left her. They think she was probably a teenage girl. There is no other information about her.

"As far as my father's side, Roger Tanner, his father's name was Dennis Tanner. I never knew him and neither did he. All I know is he was in Greenland working on the construction of Thule Air Force Base in 1952 and '53 and he disappeared. No one knows what happened to him. My father doesn't remember him because he was only a baby when Dennis, his father, disappeared. My grandmother, Helen Tanner, raised my father alone and did a darn good job. My Grandma Helen died when I was about ten. I have no idea who her parents were. I never knew them. My father has never talked about them to me, and I'm not sure if Grandma Helen ever talked to him about them, but I suppose I should ask him. So, the only ones I know of on my side of the family are my mom and dad, and my sisters Lauren and Shannon. That's it. That's all I know. Of course, we know Shannon's and Lauren's husbands, and Shannon's two boys, and

Lauren's girl and boy. And that just leaves our nine amazing children."

Everyone smiled.

Thomas nodded. "Keegan, would you like to see if you can find out about Dennis' and Helen's heritage? Or your mother's family? I mean, I'm amazed at what people can find through old records, and through online sources, and of course, Ameritech could trace the DNA."

Keegan sighed. "I'm not sure if I'm interested or not. I have so much on my plate right now, but maybe, sometime in the future, I might look into it."

Thomas smiled. "Well, when you do, I'd be happy to help."

"Thank you, sir," Keegan said softly.

✝✝✝

January 22nd, 8:00 PM PST Wednesday Evening

Hopewood Chapel, Huntington Beach, California

Taylor Kino and Mika Burton stood together with several other teens around the refreshment table in the downstairs community room, chatting and laughing and eating. They'd had a great meeting and Taylor was excited. She could feel that lives were already changing, especially the lives of the kids who lived in the apartments next door.

Taylor watched Mika as she responded to all the compliments being given her about last Sunday's performance. It was nice to see her bloom and flourish. She seemed so light-hearted ever since Teo was out of her life. No more pressure. She was free to live the righteous life that she wanted. Sometimes you have to get rid of the toxic people in your life who are weighing you down or holding you back. Sometimes you get rid of them or sometimes you pray for them and help them. Knowing which one to do is not always easy to figure out, Taylor thought. But, if you stay close to God in prayer and thought, the figuring gets easier.

Taylor saw Kaylee heading upstairs and leaned toward Mika. "Hey Mika, I have to go talk to someone. I'll meet you out front."

Mika nodded and smiled. "I'll just be another few minutes."

Taylor headed upstairs. "Kaylee!" she called.

Kaylee stopped and smiled at Taylor. "Well, hello there Taylor Kino."

"Hey," Taylor said, her eyes roaming over Kay's beautiful face. "Wow, Kay, I mean, up front and personal, you are so gorgeous!"

Kaylee smiled. "Aww, thank you, Taylor, I appreciate that, but look who's talkin'. So, how's Gabe?"

"He's working really hard. By the end of the day he's so exhausted he barely has the time or energy to give me a quick two-minute call and then study, pray and get some sleep."

"I guess training to be a special agent is gonna be hard," Kaylee said.

Taylor nodded. "So, can I ask you what your plans are?"

"Plans?"

"Like, I mean, like with your life. What are you studying in school?"

"I was just studying Gen Ed, general education. Like liberal arts courses. But I'm thinking of changing that up to something like, psychology."

"Oh wow! That would be awesome. But that could take a long time, right?"

"Well, I don't have to get a PHD. I could just get a bachelor's degree."

"So, what can you do if you have a bachelor's degree in psychology?"

"Well, I could be a counselor or social worker, but..."

"Go ahead. But what?"

"Well, I mean, I really just want to know the best way to raise kids."

"You mean so you can be a better mom?"

"Right. I know it sounds stupid, but Taylor, so, like, don't tell anyone, but all I really wanna do is find someone like your Gabe, or like JoJo, and love them and have them love me and then, like, be a great wife and a great mother. Does that just sound so lame?"

"Not to me. It doesn't sound lame at all. It sounds like you're being true to your nature. But really, if I'm being honest, I have to say that, because that's what I want to do. I just want to be a stay-at-home-mom and take care of my family and create beautiful experiences and memories for my fam."

Kaylee nodded. "Yeah, but the girls at school are giving me a hard time about it. They say I'm just lazy."

"Uh, being a good wife and mother takes a lot of time and energy. I mean, if you do it right. Cooking good nutritious meals. Counseling and teaching your kids. Doctoring. Nursing. Continuing to learn things yourself so you can help your kids with their school work. Giving all your time and energy."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"And like," Taylor went on, "if you have something you love to do, you can share that. Like I love to dance. And I'm gonna teach my kids how to dance and sing and all about sports. Everything, so they'll be well-rounded."

"Exactly, and I think that's what I want to do, but also, there is still something else I might look into as far as a career."

"Cool, I'm listening."

"I think I'd also like to counsel girls about their self-worth and stuff, kinda like the way your grandfather counseled me."

"Granddad is the best," Taylor said.

"I agree. And my dad is visiting with him right now and I don't think I've ever seen him happier. Of course, that might be because he's walking."

"Isn't that just the coolest thing?" Taylor exclaimed. "God is so good."

Kaylee smiled and nodded. "So, Taylor, what made you come running up here to talk to me?"

"Oh, well, I just felt like God was telling me to go talk to you. I thought it might be because you were sad or struggling or something. But that wasn't it. So, I'm glad you're doing so well."

"Well, I wasn't sad, but you did just help me to see that it's really not such a big no-no, I mean, thinking about being a wife and mother. Everyone at school was making me think I'm out of my mind. But they're just a small percentage of people. It is an honorable thing to be."

Taylor grinned. “It really is. Dad says people at the colleges are being indoctrinated to believe Satan’s lies. Like, marriage and family, not good. Stay-at-home mom, not good. Stay at home dads, good. Women in big power jobs, good. Men in big power jobs, bad. Men pretending to be women in women’s sports, good. Women hate men, good. So anyway, Dad says they’re pushing all that to destroy, like, the relationship between men and women and if Satan does that, he destroys the family, and if he does that, he destroys the world and he wins.”

Kaylee nodded thoughtfully. “Interesting. When I think about it, it does seem that’s what I’ve been being taught, like, in little ways.”

Taylor nodded. “Yeah, they’re sneaky. But yeah, it’s wonderful if a woman wants to be a good wife and mother. Ya know, my mom has a brilliant career as an actress but she says she should have concentrated more on her family and given my father three or four more kids. But she was caught up in the career thing and couldn’t see it until it was too late. But now, God blessed her with a baby and we are all so crazy happy about it.”

Kaylee smiled. “I’m really happy for your mom, I mean, for all of you. When is the baby due?”

“Right around my birthday, which is also around my mom’s birthday, because we were both born at the end of August.”

“Cool. Do you hope it’s a girl or boy?”

Taylor’s brow wrinkled. “I’m not sure. I mean, a sister would be cool, but actually, a boy would be fun to watch grow up and see my brother interact with him. Or a sister too.” She laughed. “I guess either one would be so much fun.”

“Well look at this, two gorgeous girls standing right here at the same place. I must be in heaven.”

The girls turned to smile at the handsome Ryder Bell.

Taylor giggled. “Ryder, you seem different. Happier. Like, more outgoing.”

Ryder smiled and nodded. “Well, I guess I am happy. My father is in jail. My stepmother is recovering well, my two sisters are safe and doing well. My ‘foster dad,’ your uncle, has made sure she will be financially stable, and it feels like a huge weight lifted off me.”

“How did Uncle Mark do that?”

“He has given Naomi possession of the auto repair shop my father owned, hired a manager for her. He says it’s actually a good business, but was being run into the ground. He settled a lawsuit being filed against the shop, had a meeting with the employees, had the place cleaned and organized and everyone is happier. It’s like a miracle. But that’s not even the best miracle.”

“Okay,” Kaylee said. “I’ll bite. What’s the best miracle?”

Ryder’s face got serious. “Well, my ‘foster uncle,’ Taylor’s Uncle Joey, he tracked down my mother and sister. I spoke to my mom over the phone and she cried and I cried. It was awesome, and I’m gonna see her maybe next week. She wasn’t real sure about the time yet.”

“Oh Ryder,” Taylor exclaimed and threw her arms around his neck and hugged him.

As soon as she let go, Kaylee did the same. “Ryder, I’m so happy for you,” Kaylee said.

“Thanks, ladies. I’m so grateful. The Adams, they’ve like come and made everything right.”

Kaylee nodded. “It seems that’s what they like to do. I’m grateful too.”

“What’s goin’ on out here?” JoJo said as he and Raylynn approached.

“I was just telling these two the good news about my family.”

JoJo nodded. “It’s awesome, isn’t it?”

“It is so awesome,” Taylor said. “Stuff like this, it’s what makes me happy. I love it so much.”

JoJo nodded. “It is definitely beautiful.”

Ryder smiled. “Yep, and JoJo and Logan and I were talking last night, and...”

“Let me guess, were you roasting marshmallows?” Taylor said.

He grinned. “How’d ya guess? So, we were talking and JoJo pointed out that me going through such a hard time, it made me see just how much I love my mom and sister and my stepmom and sisters. And it made me see how, me, as a man, well sort of a man, how I can make things so good for my wife and kids, or make them so bad. The whole thing has changed me. Made me a stronger person.”

“Well, that’s Preacher for ya,” Raylynn said.

Ryder grinned. “Yep. He’s the best.”

“Stop,” JoJo said. “We all know that the hard times either break us or makes us stronger and Ryder didn’t break.”

“Yeah, and they even wrote a song about that,” Logan quipped as he approached with Melody.

They all chuckled.

“Well, it looks like everyone is headed out,” JoJo said.

Taylor nodded. “I’m gonna go find Mika and walk her to the security gate.”

“Where’s your agent?” Logan asked.

Taylor pointed toward the door. “Don’t worry, he’s waiting for me just outside the front doors.”

“Where’s young Eric tonight?” Ryder asked.

“He went to watch Jordan’s late practice and then took her to eat.”

Taylor quickly hugged everyone and went to grab Mika. Together the two girls headed out the front arched doors and down the steps.

“So, how’s your mom?” Taylor asked.

Mika smiled. “She’s doing so good, Taylor. She got hired by your Dad’s people who are managing the apartments. She’s gonna be the assistant manager at first and they are training her to be the manager, and she’s gonna make like, my mom says more than double what she makes on her old job.”

“Oh, Mika, I’m so happy for her, and for you.”

“Thanks, girl, me too. I’m so glad your mom and dad decided to buy the place. Everything they’re doing, it is changing my whole life.”

Taylor smiled. “I’m glad.”

"And it feels so good to know that someone that might hurt me or mess with me will not be walking around here."

Taylor nodded. "Except the ones that still live here."

"Yeah, but they'll be too 'fraid to try anything."

They walked to the edge of the drive that led down to the apartments. There was a beautiful new sign on the other side of the drive on a brick base, *The Village Garden Apartment Homes.* Only three car lengths in was the brand new large black iron security gate. It had large scrolls in its design and was quite lovely. The little Security Gatehouse was on the left side of the drive, just inside the gate.

Agent Thomas was there, chatting with Mika's mother. Taylor smiled. She had a feeling a romance was blooming.

"Hi, Mom," Mika called to her from outside the gate. "Soo, like, whatcha doin' up here?"

"I just came up to walk you home."

"Mom, you didn't have to do that."

"I know, sweetie. But isn't it so nice that I can. That I'm not off working but I'm right here."

"Yeah, it's cool."

Taylor's body guard stepped forward. "Agent Thomas," he said offering his hand. "Good to see ya."

"You too, Wyatt. I see ya got a cush job."

Wyatt chuckled. "Are you kidding me? Keeping this kiddo safe has become pretty tricky."

"I imagine it is."

They stopped talking as a group of kids passed Mika and entered the pedestrian gate that currently was standing open. The kids turned and nodded. "Hey, Taylor," one girl said.

"Hey Jayla," Taylor said with a smile. "See ya Sunday!"

The group filed through the gate. Agent Thomas nodded and called each one by name, told them to be safe and behave. There were even a few 'yes sirs.'

"Wow, I'm so impressed, Agent Thomas," Taylor said. "I mean, you knew everyone's name."

He nodded. "I take my job seriously, Taylor. You know that. So I will learn every single person who lives here or who visits here, as will the other agents whom I assign to man this gate and patrol this neighborhood."

Taylor nodded. "Oh, yes sir, I do know that you guys are totally the best. You're the three P's."

"Three P's?"

"Yes sir. Perfectly and precisely professional."

Thomas laughed.

"So, Agent Thomas, you're the head security guy?" Taylor asked.

"For now. I'll head things up, make sure everyone is safe. How long that will be we'll just have to see."

Tamika smiled. So did Tori, Mika's mom. So did Agent Wyatt.

"So what is that being built down past the gatehouse?" Taylor asked.

"What you see there, young lady, is the foundation and framing for what will be a small office building for the apartment manager."

"Oh, cool. So that's where you'll be working, Mrs. Burton?"

Tori nodded. "Yes, and the manager."

"Do you know who the manager will be?"

"For now, I think it's one of your father's employees. I think they haven't found a manager yet."

"Oh, okay." Taylor looked through the gate to the office building and beyond. There was already more light from the lights on the gate. The wall that used to be almost in total darkness was now illuminated. That was the wall where Teo and his gang used to sit and watch everybody. Taylor noticed that all the gang graffiti was gone. She'd overheard her mom and dad talking about their plans for that wall. They'd decided to have the older kids who lived in the apartments submit their own art drawn on paper and one or two would be selected to paint their ideas on the wall. It had to be classy, no violence, no sexual images, something uplifting. The drawings would be judged by Aunt Breez and Aunt Jeffy. Taylor was excited to see what would appear on this wall come spring.

Farther down, Taylor could see that the first two sets of storage buildings were already finished. She knew that because they'd just moved the people from Building A into the *Golden Hotel Home Suites*. They'd already taken the roof off of building A and were working on framing of the newly designed units. It was pretty exciting to see the transformation begin. Her parents said the renovation of each building will take a month. Taylor loved it. She loved seeing something that was old or run down refreshed and renewed or even just cleaned. It was kind of like what happens to a person when they find Jesus; refreshed, renewed and cleaned. The people who live here are gonna feel lighter and hopefully happier.

Taylor sighed and turned to her sweet friend, Mika. "So, does all this make you feel happier?"

"It's all really good. Life is better. Happy? I'm not sure about that."

"Why not?"

Mika sighed and glanced at her mother. "I, uh, can't really talk about it. But Taylor, there are things you don't know about me. Things, like, things I've done. I don't know if I could ever be really happy."

Taylor frowned. "Can you talk about it if we had some alone time?"

Mika shook her head. "No, because I don't want you to know. I'm just saying, life is much better. Sooo much better and I'll settle for that. Happy? I'm happier, but I don't think totally happy is possible."

"Because of something bad you did."

Mika blew out a breath. "Right. So leave it."

Taylor sighed and nodded sadly. "Okay, I won't press, but let me just say this; it doesn't matter what you did, Mika, Jesus will understand and He will forgive you. So,

like, talk to Him about it."

"You ready, Tamika?" Tori called.

Mika looked into Taylor's eyes and nodded. "I will. See ya."

Taylor watched her go through the gate, then turned and looked up at Agent Wyatt. "Did you hear what she said?"

"Yes."

"I wonder what she did that's so bad."

"Taylor, pray for her, offer her your support, but let her come to you and don't press her."

"But what if she never opens up about it?"

"She will."

"How do you know?"

"Because *she* brought it up. She's testing the waters. She's probably trying to see if you'll judge her or hate her."

"Of course I wouldn't."

"Yeah, but she doesn't know that. So, don't push, be supportive, she'll eventually open up."

"How do you know this stuff? Did you study psychology?"

Wyatt smiled. "No. But I've worked with a whole lot of traumatized people, and talked their cases over with Chief Lee and your grandfather, so, I'm learning."

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

Wyatt shook his head with a sigh. "Let's don't speculate. It could be anything, drugs, stealing something, or worse. Anything. So let's not speculate. Just make sure that whatever it is, you will handle it with love and compassion, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Just pray for her and pray for the right way to help her."

"Yes sir. I will."

"You're a great kid, Taylor. You are very much a Kino."

Taylor smiled. "Thank you, sir."

✝✝✝

January 23rd 6:30 AM Thursday Morning

Faryab Province, Afghanistan

Jake's eyes traveled over the five people they'd just smuggled onto a truck. Three men, all Afghani soldiers, one female CIA operative and a twelve year old kid, who was very sick. They'd worked hard for three weeks trying to gather up these five and get them out. They'd finally made a harrowing escape from a small village off the north side of the city of Maymana.

The three soldiers were on a kill list because they'd helped cover for the escape of US Marines three years earlier. They'd been hiding from town to town and their wives and children had been murdered. They all had that same haunted look in their eyes. The CIA operative, had been posing as the sister of the wife of a major Taliban commissioner of intelligence. She'd been imprisoned and beaten and raped and tortured and left behind. She too had that haunted look in her eyes. The kid, was the oldest son

of a Taliban fighter. The kid had refused to do what he was told, which was to execute his uncle. His father sent him away, to try to save him. Jake knew he would encounter these types of things, but it still hurt. He said a quick prayer for them while they traveled.

They were now about three clicks from their rendezvous point. Two choppers would evacuate them from this forsaken land. Jake and his team were tired and ready for this mission to end. The truck slowed and Jake became alert and listened through his com.

"We got trouble," Shane said from his place in the driver's seat. We're being stopped. "Get ready."

"Copy that," Jake said. The five evacuees were helped to lay down in the wooden crates and covered with straw. Three other Raiders, Derrick, Drew and Corey, did the same. Jake, in his Afghani garb, laid on the floor as if sleeping.

Travis, in the front passenger seat spoke next. "Two pickups. Looks like eight, all armed. Low on the totem pole, I think."

Jake listened as the truck finally rolled to a stop. They were being asked for papers, which were handed over. Shane was making small talk.

Jake could hear that they were asked what was in the truck. They argued a bit. The truck flaps in the back were raised and Jake sat up, rubbing his eyes, pretending to have just awakened. He was ordered to move back out of the way and he did, watching and waiting for the moment he'd have to pull out his rifle and blow these guys away.

One of them kicked one of the boxes and asked what was in them. Jake spoke in his best Farsi. "It is dried fruit and pomegranate juice."

"Open one," the man ordered.

Jake grabbed a crow bar and went to open the one that held one of his team instead of the one that really held the goods.

"No. Not that one. Open this one," the man said with a sneer.

Jake sighed and acted as if he didn't want to open that one. Slowly, he pried open the crate and moved the paper straw out of the way. The man pulled out a cardboard box of dried raisins and apricots. Jake held his breath. The man looked him in the eye.

"Open the other one," the man ordered.

Jake rolled his eyes at the man. When he didn't move fast enough the man pushed Jake back and went to open the crate himself.

Jake reached for his rifle under his bedding on the floor as the man opened the crate. "We are compromised," Jake said as Derrick rose up. The Taliban man yelled as Jake fired two shots and the man fell out the back of the truck.

"Go, go, go," Jake yelled. The truck slammed forward. They rammed the two pickups, known as 'technicals' because they had mounted machine guns. They'd been parked in a 'V' in front of them on the roadway. Ramming the trucks took out two Taliban at the same time.

Unfortunately, one of the trucks was still driveable and was quickly in pursuit. They were going at a breakneck speed. Less than three clicks from their rendevous, about a mile and a half.

"Chopper ETA is one minute," Travis yelled.

Jake and Derrick stood at the back of the truck spraying the oncoming truck with bullets.

They had to jump to the side out of the way of a barrage of bullets.

The truck took a sharp turn toward their destination.

Three of the five Raiders in the back of the truck kept up their fire. Jake was sure he hit another guy. The other two were getting the RPs, the recovered personnel, out of their crates and ready to run to the helicopter. The boy would probably have to be carried. They were almost there. They could hear the chopper.

Just then, Jake felt a burning sensation in his leg. He looked down. A bullet whizzed past his head and he heard Derrick grunt. Saw him go down. Jake moved forward and sprayed the truck again, finally taking out the machine gunner. They drove over the rise and the one chopper sprayed the technical with bullets taking the rest of them out.

Jake immediately threw himself down next to Derric, rolled him over and grimaced at the large hole in his shoulder. He began first aid. "Hold on," buddy," Jake commanded. Derrick only grunted.

"We gotta move, Jake," Corey said.

They all piled out of the truck, Drew carrying Derrick, Corey carrying the boy, Jake, and Shane covering and Travis hurrying the others onto the chopper. But as they ran, another vehicle pulled up and five more gunmen jumped out. The Raiders ran through the hail of gunfire.

Drew took a hit in the leg and went down.

Jake turned and instead of running to the chopper he ran toward the five Taliban. "Get Derrick and Drew," he yelled. "Go, Go," he screamed as he returned fire. He felt the sting and knew he'd been hit, but didn't stop. Then another sting. Screaming in frustration, he ran at them firing and being fired at, taking several more hits.

"Jake, come on," Shane yelled as he ran to him. Together they took out the last two guys, turned and ran to the chopper.

In seconds they were in the air. Jake watched as Corey tried to stabilize Derrick. He began to pray, asking God to spare his friend. His eyes shifted to Drew who'd been hit in the leg. Travis was working on him.

"Trav, how's he doin'?"

"He'll make it," Travis said as he worked.

Shane looked Jake over. "The question is, how are you?"

"I'm good."

"Bro, I know I saw you get hit, more than once."

One of the Afghani soldiers nodded his head. "He did. I saw him take four or five bullets. You need to check it out."

Jake looked down at his body. He pulled the Afghani perahan over his head and ran his own hands over his body.

Shane grabbed up the perahan and looked it over. "Dude, there are holes all over this shirt. You've been hit, one, two, freak, three, four, five, six or more times, in the

chest and abs."

Jake frowned. "I don't understand. I'm good."

Shane reached over and jerked Jake's tactical vest away, opened his shirt and looked him over. He had graze marks on his shoulder, neck, arms. More than five. Seven or eight. He looked back at the vest. You have four bullets in the vest, Jake. Four. "That's the craziest thing I've ever seen," Shane mumbled. "It's like, I mean, they sprayed him with bullets and the bullets hit the vest, and you stayed upright. But these other holes. You should show wounds in the shoulder, the neck, the arm, the hip, the upper thigh, but somehow, the bullets were deflected. You didn't feel all that?"

Jake sighed. "I mean, I felt something burning a few times. That's all."

"That's crazy man. You are like superhuman."

Jake smiled. "Not hardly. But, maybe God was looking out for us."

"Maybe so," Drew said. "Definitely He was, because if not for you, me and Derrick would surely be dead. So, I guess God kept you goin', long enough for us to be able to get on the chopper."

There was silence on the chopper as nine men, one woman and one child contemplated what had taken place. Meanwhile, Jake prayed for Derrick and Drew as they traveled back to the post in Kabul.

✝✝✝

January 23rd, 9:30 AM Thursday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest Georgia

Melaynah Leigh Stewart Appel closed the dishwasher and pushed the button. She'd always thought it was a pleasant sound, the hum of the dishwasher as it started its cycle. Maybe it wasn't the sound. Maybe it was the feeling of, '*finally the dishes are done and that's one more chore out of the way.*' Laynah turned and smiled at the beautiful woman she'd called 'Aunt Jodi' her whole life. She never aged. She was half Korean, half Chinese. She was beautiful. Mostly though, she was one of God's strong warriors. She was a rock for everyone. For her husband, for her son, for Laynah's mom, for Aunt Lizzy, and now, Aunt Jodi was her mother-in-law.

"Thanks for the help," Jodi said.

"It was nothing. Glad I could help. Poor Lily."

Jodi nodded. "The bad guys are out to get her for some reason, but we're stronger. Light is stronger than darkness. We won't let them win."

Laynah sighed and looked up as Uncle John came in the back door with a crate filled with raw milk.

"Good morning, ladies," he said jovially.

"Good morning, Uncle John," Laynah said.

"How was breakfast?" he asked.

"Easy," Laynah said. "The Sawyers and the Mayfields. That's it. It's harder to help mom feed our family."

John laughed. "I bet. And wait just another year or so and Charlie and Matt are gonna be insatiable."

"Charlie already is eating each meal like he's been starving for a day."

John nodded. “Well now, I guess that means he’s gonna be a big boy. I mean, look at your dad.”

Laynah nodded and pulled her phone from her back jeans pocket as it buzzed. Her eyes lit up and she answered quickly. “Jake?”

“Hey, Bugs!”

Laynah immediately teared up and sniffed. “Jake, it’s so good to see your face, to hear your voice. It’s been weeks.”

“I know, babe. It was a long hard mission.”

Jodi and John crowded behind Laynah to get a look at their son.

“Hey Mom, hey Dad,” Jake said brightly.

“Oh, Jacob Appel,” Jodi said softly. “You are a sight for sore eyes.”

Jake smiled. “The scene I’m looking at right now, is too. My wife, my mom, my dad, standing apparently in *my* kitchen.”

They all laughed at his words, because Jake always had proclaimed ownership of the kitchen at the Inn.

“Whatcha doin’ at the Inn, Bugs?” Jake asked.

“Oh, I came to help out for breakfast, because it’s the staff’s off day and Lily got hit by a car and broke her arm.”

“What? Good grief, is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s good, considering she only broke her arm.”

John’s eyes narrowed. “And where are you, son? Because that doesn’t look like the com center. It looks like a BAS.”

Jake sighed. “Good catch, Dad.”

“What’s a bass?” Laynah asked.

Jodi sighed. “B-A-S, it stands for Battallion Aid Station.”

“Aid? Like a hospital?” Laynah asked.

“Not quite a hospital, babe,” Jake said. “But it’s a medical facility. I’m okay, they’re just monitoring me and administering some antibiotics.”

“Why? What happened?”

Jake took a deep breath. “Okay, don’t go crazy. This is gonna sound worse than it is. We just got back from a mission about eight hours ago. Things went south. Derrick was hit. Then Drew got hit while he was running with Derrick on his back. They both went down. I stepped in to cover them while the others got five recovered personnel, Derrick, Drew and themselves on the chopper. And while I was doing that, I got hit a few times. But I’m good. Really.”

“Okay,” John began, “so, that doesn’t sound so bad, so why did you say it sounded worse than it is. What are you not saying?” John asked. “How many times is a few times? Because more than once is bad.”

Jake smiled. “Dad you are so smart.”

“And you’re stalling.”

“Okay. I was hit— eleven times.”

Laynah gasped. Jodi’s eyes opened wide.

John nodded. “Go on. Because obviously, you weren’t hurt badly.”

"Right. I wasn't. The guys, they say they saw the bullets hitting me and then, like, bouncing off, like I was superman or something. The vest took four bullets. I have graze burns. Two on my left arm, and one on my shoulder, hip, leg, neck, and a nice new part in my hair."

"Your hair. It hit your head?" Laynah gasped.

John and Jodi were silent.

"Sounds like we have a whole lot to be grateful for," John finally said.

Jake smiled and nodded. "Exactly. And Derrick was the worst, but he's in the hospital and needs your prayers. Drew got hit in the back of the thigh and he's gonna be okay. The kid we rescued was deathly ill, and he's on the road to recovery. The other's we rescued, are weak, but healthy, though they'll have severe emotional scars to deal with. Still, it was a successful mission and we're all just happy to be back and alive."

"Don't let him BS you guys," someone said in the background. "We're all back alive because of Jake."

Shane, one of Jake's team, leaned over Jake's bed and looked into the camera. "Hey guys!"

John smiled. "Hello there, Shane. Nice to see you alive and well."

"Right? And it's all because of Jake. You shoulda seen him, sir. He was like Superman or something. When Drew went down, Jake ran forward like some madman, spraying like eight guys with fire. I know I saw the bullets hit him. I was trying to get Derrick on my back and get him to the chopper. I turned around to see if Corey was able to get to Drew, and I saw more bullets hit Jake and then ping away from him."

Jake leaned forward. "God intervened, Dad. That's what that was."

John nodded. "That seems obvious." He briefly closed his eyes. "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you."

"Amen," Jake said softly.

"Let me see that beautiful wife of yours and I'll leave you alone to talk," Shane said as he smiled at the camera. "Hello, Laynah," he said with a grin. "Lord have mercy, girl, you are lookin' good."

"Stop oglin' my wife," Jake commanded.

Laynah giggled. "Hey Shane. It's nice to see you. Where's Corey?"

"He's chowin' down. That's where I'm goin' too."

"What time is it there?"

"It's about 6:15 in the evening," Jake said.

"Well, bye Appel family," Shane said as he leaned down and planted a big kiss on the top of Jake's head. "Love ya, brother."

Jake didn't answer but just watched Shane as he left the room.

"Well," John began, "your mom and I too, will leave you alone so that you can talk to your wife."

"Okay, thanks Dad. I love you."

"Love you too, son. And I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Love you, baby," Jodi said quickly.

"Love you too, Mom."

"Get well, sweetheart and stay alive please."

"That's completely up to God," Jake said.

Jodi nodded. "I'll leave you to your sweet wife. She's been such a help and she's been so strong for you."

Jake smiled at that information. "Thanks, Mom. Bye."

"Bye baby," Jodi said as she blew kisses and John waved at Laynah's phone and left the room.

Laynah jumped up and took a seat on the kitchen island and looked into the phone. "I miss you so much."

"I miss you too, baby," he murmured.

"Are you really okay?"

"Yes. Really. And it's so good to look into your beautiful eyes and see your beautiful face and know that it won't be too much longer before I'm seeing you in person, looking down at you in my bed and making love to my wife, and listening to her tell me all the things she's been doing while I was gone. That is gonna be such heaven."

Laynah couldn't stop the tear that spilled over onto her cheek as she imagined what he was saying. "Oh, Jake. Not too much longer right?"

"Right. We're at the end of five months, baby. It might be another month or two. That's doable, right?"

"Do I have another choice?"

He smiled. "Good point. What have you been up to?"

"Well, the land for our house and for the stable has been cleared. And a long drive from the main highway has been cut and graveled. And the foundation for the stable has been poured, but not for the house, because I want you to finalize the house plans first."

"Thanks for that. I'm sorry I haven't been able to look them over. Now that I'm back, I'll get right to it."

"There's no hurry, Jake."

"Well, there is, because I don't know when we'll head back out. Though I think I'll have some time to recover from these graze wounds and they're gonna have to replace Derrick. He's done for now."

"But he's gonna be okay, right?" Laynah asked.

"Yes. It's just that it will take him months to recover. When he's done with rehab and they release him, he'll be back on the team."

"Good for him," Laynah said.

"Good for us too," Jake said.

Laynah nodded. "And Drew?"

"He'll be back with us in a few weeks."

"Good. So, do you wanna hear about the newest edition to our little Pine Forest family?"

"Sure. Who is it?"

"Well, it began when this guy named Justice Sawyer showed up at the old Sawyer

house on Main Street."

"Right. The one across from *Appel Martial Arts* and the one you said the Kinos bought for Lily, to make her little restaurant. So, Justice Sawyer, he's a descendent of the people that built that house?"

"Yes. Okay, so, let me tell you all about the Sawyers."

Jake smiled with pleasure as Laynah told him the story of what was goin' down. Listening to his beautiful, young wife speak about his hometown, about the people he loved, about God and demons and overcoming the darkness, he thanked God for her. He was a very blessed man and he wished he was there to help them fight the darkness, however, wasn't that exactly what he was doing?

✝✝✝

2 Corinthians 4:6

"For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."

Chapter Twenty-Two

January 23rd, 7:30 AM Thursday Morning
Mark Adams Home, Newport Beach, California

Mark Adams hurried down the stairs and scooped four-year-old Emily up into his arms. "Hey there my little munchkin. Good morning, sweetie."

"Good morning, Daddy," she replied loudly and then hugged his neck. "Is you going to work today?"

"It's ARE you going to work, and yes, baby girl, I'm going to work."

"I don't want you to go. I miss you when you go."

"I miss you too, Em, but I have to go help some people that God wants me to help. You don't want me to tell God 'no', do you?"

"No. Always say 'yes' to God, right?"

"Right."

"Who is you helping?"

"Who *ARE* you helping, say it right."

"Who *ARE* you helping?" she said loudly.

Mark chuckled. "Very good. I am going to court to help a man that somebody told a lie about."

"JoJo told a lie about me once," Em said with a frown.

"Oh really?"

"Yes. He said I was bein' mean and I wasn't."

"Do you think he was just teasing you?"

She shrugged.

"Well, I guess I'd better have a little talk with JoJo, huh?"

She frowned. "Um, I think he was prolly just teasing."

Mark nodded. "Oh, okay then. Good."

He walked into the kitchen and set her at the table and turned and kissed his wife on the cheek. "Hello, Bells," he said softly.

She smiled sweetly. "Good morning, honey. Breakfast is ready."

"Where are the boys?"

"Ryder left early to check on Naomi and the girls before he goes to work. Logan had an early rehearsal time for the spring musical, and JoJo got a phone call and stepped out back for some privacy."

Mark glanced out the french doors to see JoJo with his phone to his ear, pacing back and forth on the patio. "Hmm, hope it's not a problem."

Bella nodded. "Me too. Early calls make me nervous."

Mark smiled at her. Pulled her close. "How are you feeling?" he said as he placed his hand on her abdomen. "And how's the little one?"

"The little one is doing great. I have an appointment Monday."

He frowned. "I can't go with you. I have to be in court Monday. I'm accompanying our newest attorney to county court."

Bella nodded. "I'll be fine. Breez is gonna watch Em."

He smiled. "Bells, do you remember when you told me that you made up stories in your imagination about you being married to me and Breez being married to my brother and all the things we were gonna do together as a family?"

Bella smiled. "I do remember. I was so in love with you, Mark. But even in my imagination I had no idea that things would be as good as they are, because Mark, I am so happy. I love you, I love the kids, I love my family and I love God. I don't think I could be any happier."

Mark smiled. "Well, you'll realize when we stand face to face with Jesus, that is when you'll know true joy."

She grinned. "I can't even imagine how wonderful that will be."

Contentedly, he helped her carry things to the table and sat down just as JoJo came in the door.

"Oh, hey Dad. Good morning."

"Good morning, son. Everything okay?"

JoJo nodded.

"Was that Raylynn?"

"No sir. That was Dr. Fisher."

"Hold on," Mark said and quickly blessed the food.

He raised his head. "So, Dr. Fisher, your old high school principal?"

"Yes sir. He just called to ask me to speak to the seniors in the spring before their graduation."

"Speak to the seniors about what?" Mark asked.

"About life. About not giving up. About adjusting when things don't go your way. About being strong and not letting failures keep you down. About working hard at something. Giving your all, etcetera. You know."

Mark nodded. "Are you going to do it?"

"Well, I tried to tell him that I'm still young and making mistakes and I'm not sure that I'm the best one to speak."

"And?"

"And he said that first, I'm alumni of the school and that is a big deal to the kids. And then he said he's watched me preach livestream a few Sundays, and has also seen video of my teaching at youth night and also, as you know, someone posted the video of my talk to the team before the Rose Bowl *aand* he saw me speak at the Kino thing that was held at Ameritech a few weeks ago. Dr. Fisher said that there was no one more qualified than me to get through to the kids."

"And so, you're gonna do it?"

"Yes sir."

Mark nodded with a smile. "Good. So, how are you feeling about your life? About how things have gone down?"

JoJo sighed. “Well, if you’re asking if I’m disappointed, the answer is no. I’m excited to see what the Lord has in store for me. But I’m also a little confused. I’ve been praying so hard, and it feels like God doesn’t want to answer me.”

Mark smiled. “He probably doesn’t.”

“Huh?”

“Sometimes, when you don’t get an immediate answer, it’s because God is wanting you to develop some patience, or some faith, or do some research on your own, or some work on your own.”

JoJo nodded thoughtfully.

Mark went on. “He hasn’t abandoned you. He’s there with you, watching you, walking next to you while you work on it.”

“Okay.”

“Or, maybe, it’s just taking a little while for everything to come together for you. You’re having to cook a little. Simmer a little. You’re not even halfway through your rehab. God is with you. Trust Him. Be patient.”

“Yes sir. Thanks. It’s weird. While Logan and young Eric were trying to figure out what they wanted to do, I thought I already had my life figured out. It seemed my path was clear. And now, Logan is about to be a big recording star, working miracles on lives through his music. And young Eric is about to be a big film star, working miracles in lives through movies. And I’m the one who doesn’t know how I’m gonna make a living. Even Ryder, who’s lived with us one whole month, knows he’s gonna be a carpenter and possibly even a contractor to build homes for people. He says, once he gets established, he wants to repair homes for people who are struggling.”

Mark nodded. “He’s doing well. I’m proud of him.”

JoJo smiled. “Me too. But here I am, Dad, thinking that I’ve found the one, the girl I’m gonna marry, but I have no job and don’t know how I’m gonna support her, but, man, I sure know how to throw a football,” he quipped sarcastically.

Mark frowned. “You know so much more than that, son. Maybe you should watch the same videos that Dr. Fisher has watched.” He sighed. “So, Joe, I think I need to apologize to you.”

“Why? What did you do?” JoJo said with a smile.

“No, I’m serious. I’m thinking, I shoved football down your throat. I played. I was good. How good would my son be? Maybe, I was pushing my own dreams on you and now, you feel like you’ve wasted half your life playing football.”

“I didn’t say that I feel like I’ve wasted my life on football. Did I say that? I don’t think I said that.”

“No, but here you are, your football career over, a girl you think you want to marry, and no job.”

“Well, like, I’m still young, Dad. I’ll find work. I just need to trust God. I’m sure He has plans for me. It just might take some time.”

Mark smiled and nodded.

JoJo blinked. “Oooh, very good, Dad. You pulled a Granddad on me.”

“A small one,” Mark said with a smile. “But really now, tell me, what do you think

you have going for you?"

JoJo sighed. "Well, football has done a lot for me. I'm a leader. A warrior. A fast thinker. Decisive. I still love football. I think I can help young guys achieve great things in their football careers, but even more, help them in their lives. I mean, look at Granddad. He teaches martial arts, right? But truly, he teaches so much more than that. He changes lives for the better. And like you, Dad, you defend people in court, but you do so much more than that. You change lives for the better. I think I can use football to change lives for the better. I mean, they call me Preacher. It seems to come naturally to me.

"And like, I love working as a youth minister. I really do. I feel like I'm already making a difference in the lives of the kids. I guess Dr. Fisher believes I am too or he wouldn't want me to come and speak to the seniors. And, also, well, he also said something kind of weird."

"Like what?"

"He said he wanted to get to me first, because he wasn't the only one thinking along these lines of asking me to speak. He said he was at a state meeting of high school principles and they all were talking about me."

Mark's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

"Yes sir. He said they were talking about having me come and speak at their schools. Not necessarily for graduation but just to have me speak and interact with the kids, like in a Q and A. He said I should consider motivational speaking as a career, because that's what I'm doing anyway and I may as well get paid for it."

Mark smiled. "Now, I like the way he's thinking."

JoJo smiled. "You know I have no problem speaking in public. I'm not shy. I'm pretty confident. My mind thinks fast. But, could I make enough doing that to support a family, buy a home, pay the bills?"

"Well, first, kiddo, you know, you have quite a nest egg put away for you, so, you're bills will be paid. And do you realize how much speakers are being paid?"

JoJo nodded. "I've heard they make ridiculous amounts."

Mark shrugged. "Some do. I mean, some amounts are ridiculous, especially for the lack of information they are spewing. But you, JoJo have substance. I want you to let this settle in your mind a bit and take it the Lord in prayer and fasting."

"Yes sir."

Mark smiled. "So, JoJo, would you mind if I do some research and maybe put your name out there a bit and see what actually turns up? Just as an experiment?"

JoJo shrugged. "Sure. Go ahead. Swing away."

"And here's a few more things. I know you told Lyle Keith that you would coach him once you get through rehab. I didn't want to say anything to you until you finish rehab and get back at it and see how that goes, but personal coaching from you would be something pretty much any QB in the country would pay big bucks for. Though, for you, I wouldn't go one on one. I'd think more about training camps. Reach a lot of kids. Maybe even start a foundation for underprivileged kids to go to camps too. And here's a big one; several companies have reached out to me, since I'm your representative, to

get your endorsement. Some big guys, the usual, shoes, jerseys etc, and also some smaller companies, including Brian Canter sports equipment business. They're just waiting for you to finish rehab. There are so many streams of income, JoJo, I don't think you're gonna want for anything. You or your wife."

JoJo smiled, thinking of Raylynn as his wife and starting a life with her and taking care of her and buying a home with her and having kids with her. He blew out a breath. He was getting waaaay ahead of himself. First he'd better see if she's even thinking along those same lines, and he can't ask her that so soon, because it's only been a month. Second, he'd better get his life together and on some sort of plan or trajectory.

"Hello? Did I lose you?"

"Oh, no sir. Just thinking."

"Well, think, pray, and be patient. You have many options in front of you. Coaching. Speaking. Endorsements. Running a foundation for youth sports. And enclosed in all of those things —a ministry. You have a very bright future for someone who only knows how to throw a football."

JoJo sighed. "Thanks, Dad."

Mark rose, picked up his plate, which Bella immediately took from his hand. "You're welcome, son. I love you. I believe in you and I have many resources to help you do whatever it is you want to do, but for now, I have to get to court."

JoJo stood and hugged his father, then watched him kiss his wife and his little girl and take his leave.

Bella smiled at JoJo, came to him and hugged him. "Ahh, JoJo my sweet boy, you are gonna be a huge success, no matter what you choose. God has big plans for you, I'm sure. Trust Him."

JoJo hugged her hard. "Mom, over the past almost ten years, have I ever told you how much I love you? Have I told you how extremely grateful I am that you came into our lives and loved me as if I were your own son? I never knew a mother, so, having you as my mom, it means the world to me. I love you, Mom. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Bella smiled. "You ARE my son, JoJo. That's how I think of you. And yes, you've told me many times. And in case you didn't get the memo, I love you with my whole heart and when I see you and Logan together, I feel like falling to my knees and crying tears of joy and praising God. And then, when I see you two with Em, I don't think my heart can contain the joy. I love you, JoJo, and I don't know what I'd do without you."

"I wove you too," Em suddenly said loudly, making them both laugh.

JoJo sighed. Everything was gonna be okay. Trust God. Trust Him.

✝✝✝

January 25th Saturday Morning

Main Street, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice Sawyer emerged from his very hard workout at *Appel Martial Arts*. Standing on the sidewalk he shook hands with a few others and watched them take their leave. Sighing, he looked across the street and toward the corner, where the Sawyer house stood, looking a little ominous. That house is where his ancestor Knox Sawyer,

began a life with his sweetheart. That house is where Justice met Lily, a girl he couldn't imagine himself without. A girl he was now pretty sure he would eventually ask to marry him and make her his wife, and a mother to his children. A girl who was the only one that made him feel alive again.

He drew his eyes away from the house and looked south to the GTCC as the doors opened and Lily and Daisy walked out into the cold gray morning. Immediately, the day brightened. The sisters were a phenomena. They were beautiful, yes, that was a given. But they were bright, and happy and strong, both physically and spiritually and emotionally. The Tanner girls definitely had no "daddy issues" like a lot of girls these days.

The girls smiled and raised their arms in greeting. Justice trotted across Main Street and met up with them.

"Hey ladies," he said.

"Hey Justice," Daisy said cheerfully. "How was class?"

Justice sighed. "It was hard but I'm lovin' it." He looked into Lily's eyes. "Lily, how are you this morning?"

"I'm good."

"She's hungry," Daisy said quickly. "And she told me she hoped you were up to buy her a late breakfast."

He smiled warmly. "I'll buy you Lily, anything you want."

"Awwwuuuh," Daisy cooed loudly, making everyone roll their eyes.

Lily giggled. "Well then, shall we go to the *Church Street Diner* where we had our first breakfast?"

"Sounds lovely. Daisy? Are you coming?"

She shook her head. "No, sorry. I'm on an errand to run down to *Joe's* and grab Laynah's house designs to bring back to Rose so she and I can go over them and give her our ideas and our approval."

Justice smiled. "So, these are the plans for Laynah and Jake Appel's home?"

"Yes."

"Does Jake know that you girls are helping to plan his home?"

Daisy shrugged with a laugh. "Well, he *should* know. He's known us all his life. If he hasn't thought about it yet, he will. He's smart. He'll figure it out."

Justice laughed. "Okay, I see how it is." He took Lily's left hand. "Shall we drive or do you feel like walking?"

"Let's walk," she said softly.

"Well, I'm off," Daisy said and hurried north toward *Joe's.*

Justice and Lily also turned north to head to the light so they could cross the street. They stopped of course, in front of the house, *Lily's Place*, and looked up at the building. It was very noisy right now. A lot of hammering and drilling and men talking. They'd already cut out doors on the north side of the house on either side of the fireplace and were now busily building a giant deck on the side. Inside the house, they knew the men were working on plumbing and electrical. The house itself was pretty much gutted.

Justice gestured toward the two front windows. “Just think, Lily, soon those windows will be gone and instead there’ll be a giant picture window with *Lily’s Place* etched in bright yellow letters.”

Lily smiled. “And don’t forget the lily logo.”

“The beautiful flower? How could I forget that,” he said softly as he turned to look at her. Reaching up, he brushed some hair back from her cheek. “I think it’s very cool that God named a flower after you.”

Lily giggled.

He smiled at the sound and looked her over. Her hair was down. She wore jeans and a blue plaid shirt and her tan quilted jacket. Her blue eyes shone, her pink lips smiled. Her right arm was in a cast and cradled in a sling. That made him frown. He turned and nodded at the house. “I was thinking that my ancestor, Knox Sawyer, probably stood right here in front of this house with his love by his side as they were getting ready to start a life, start a family.” He cleared his throat. “And here I am, his great, times five or so, grandson, standing right here in the exact same place, with the most amazing girl at my side. His heart swelled as he turned to gaze at her. “Lily.”

She looked into his eyes at the serious tone in his voice. “Yes?”

“Have you given any thought to, I mean, well, to us?”

She swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, our relationship. I was wondering if you see a future that includes you and me together?”

She shrugged. “I hope I do.”

He sighed. “I mean, we’ve grown close, or in my mind we have. I’ve kissed you, but we’ve not really talked about what exactly it is we’re doing. I mean, what we’re thinking, where we’re headed.”

Lily nodded. “I’m not quite sure what to say.”

He smiled. “Okay. I’ll be the brave one. I know we’ve only known each other a short time. Still, it feels like God brought me here, yes, for the house, but maybe, like my father and your father both said, maybe that was a means to an end. What I’m trying to say is, Lily, you’re more than just a sweet girl that I’m interested in. You have changed my life.”

She frowned. “How?”

“Before I met you, I was in so much pain. I was in constant darkness. I had to fight hard every day to find my gratitude. I had to force myself to get up, go to work, eat, workout, even to pray. I was struggling. But coming here, meeting you, Lily, you bring me light. I get up every single day with a smile on my face, because I know I’ll see you.”

Lily smiled.

Justice went on. “You make me feel whole again. You make me want to be a better man. You make me hopeful. When I first told my grandfather the story of meeting you and the problem of us both wanting the same piece of property, he said the solution was right in front of me. Your family said the same thing. I was afraid to admit it then, but now, I feel like I need to tell you, Lily, that you are special to me.” He sighed and shook his head. “No, that’s not what I want to tell you. I want to say that— I really like you,

I mean, a whole lot."

"I like you too, Justice," Lily said quickly.

He smiled and shook his head. "No, that's not it either, it's more than me liking you. Lily, I'm falling in love with you."

Her eyes opened wide.

"I can't imagine my life without you. So there. I was brave. I told you what's been going through my head. Please don't let that scare you off."

"I'm not scared."

He smiled. "You're not?"

She shook her head and smiled. "No. I'm relieved, because I was afraid that the things rushing around in my head were just a silly girl's romantic musings. You know, dreaming of my Prince Charming kind of thing. All my sisters found someone special and I thought maybe I was meant to be the old maid Auntie Lily who teaches their children how to bake cookies."

Justice chuckled. "Old maid? Really?"

She shrugged. "I'm not always confident like Rose. I'm just me."

"Just you? Well, Lily, you are the most amazing girl I've ever known."

She smiled at him, turned toward him and put her left hand on his chest. "Justice, I'm feeling the same way you're feeling. I think I'm falling in love with you. It might be too soon to say that. I'm afraid of messing everything up, but there it is. The feelings are strong, and everyday when I wake up, I smile because I know I'll see you."

He covered her hand with his own, bent his head and kissed her right there in front of the house, on the small lawn in front of the double windows. He watched her eyes flutter closed as she uttered a soft sigh in the back of her throat. There seemed to be a soft hum in the air, and then a vibration, the wind began to blow and then— there was a loud explosion as the glass from the double windows in the front of the house burst outward and sprayed them with thousands of tiny particles of glass and wood. The force knocked Justice and Lily down.

Lily lay there on the walk stunned, while Justice scrambled to check on her. He rolled onto his knees and bent over her. "Lily, baby, are you okay?"

She moaned and looked up at him. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure. There was some sort of explosion. I've gotta go make sure the workers are okay, but I need to make sure you're okay first."

"I'm okay."

"You have little cuts all over your face. Tiny little dots of blood all over your face and neck." He pulled up her left arm, but it was covered with sleeves from her shirt and jacket.

She blinked up at him. "You have little cuts all over you too."

Sighing, he rose slowly, then reached down and helped her up as men ran from the house to check on them.

"Are you two okay?" Mr. Hanley asked.

"Yes, I think so," Justice replied.

Rose arrived from the community center and Daisy came back from Joe's and John

Appel came running from across the street. “What happened? Are any of your men hurt?” John asked immediately.

Mr. Hanley shook his head. “No. And I don’t know what happened. It’s like the front windows spontaneously blew out.”

“How? How can that happen?” Justice said, but even as he said it, he knew the answer. He looked up at the house. The enemy here in this place was strong. Much stronger than he ever imagined it could be. Stronger than he’d ever seen it manifest. Though really, is that true? Who knows what sent his family down into a fiery crash.

“There was no one working on a gas line, or water line,” Hanley said. “We all felt like a vibration, a rumble like distant thunder, and then boom, the windows just shattered and flew outward. I’ve never seen anything like it. It was almost like, a supernatural event.”

John sighed, glancing at Justice and Lily. “You guys are all cut up.”

Justice nodded. “We were just standing here, looking up at the house, talking over our plans, and then, I, uh, I kissed her and then the window blew out at us.”

“At you?” Rose asked.

Justice shrugged. “That’s how it seemed. I mean, it almost seemed like the house was sending a message.”

Rose looked at her Uncle John and then at Lily and Daisy. She frowned. “Well, here’s a message right back. I rebuke you. I rebuke the evil in the name of Jesus Christ. Do you hear me? I rebuke you, in Jesus’ mighty and powerful name! Be gone!” she yelled.

Mr. Hanley frowned and then nodded at his men. “Let’s get back to work. It’s two hours until lunch. Jack, will you grab a broom and get this glass up off the sidewalk and out of the grass the best you can.”

“I’m on it,” the man said.

The rest of the workers went back inside the house. Mr. Hanley nodded at Justice and John. “Hey, I’ve seen this before. Remodeling some of these older homes, especially it seems the ones in small towns, it stirs up some stuff. I don’t wanna say what, but some people call it a haunting. I don’t think that’s what it is. I’m a Christian man, and I know there is sometimes a darkness that gets stirred up.”

Justice nodded. “Are you quitting on us?” he asked.

Hanley shook his head. “Nope. I’m not scared. I got on the armor of God. But that don’t mean the bad guys can’t get in a punch or two. Y’all need to be ready. We’ll all fight this battle together.”

John Appel nodded. “Hanley, we appreciate that. And we might be in for quite a battle. Demons are real. We will win this because light is stronger than darkness. Right now though, kiddos, I suggest you get home and clean up those cuts.”

Justice nodded. “Yes sir.” He glanced at Lily. “I’ll get you something to eat at the Inn.”

“It’s okay. I’m not hungry anymore,” Lily said. “Justice, if you’ll just take me home, I feel really tired. I just want to rest.”

Rose and Daisy frowned.

Justice nodded and took Lily's hand. "My car is just across the street."

He put her in the car and took her straight home.

Lizzy smiled as they came in the door, but immediately frowned. "Oh my goodness, what happened?"

Justice sat Lily in a kitchen chair. "A window exploded right in front of us at the house."

"Exploded?" Lizzy exclaimed as she immediately grabbed supplies and started cleaning up the tiny dots of blood all over Lily's face. When she finished that, she made Justice sit and took care of his face too.

"Do you think it will scar?" Lily asked.

Lizzy shook her head. "No, the cuts are so tiny. Smaller than a needle." She took some antibiotic ointment and softly tapped it on each little spot as she asked questions about what actually happened and listened intently as they tried to explain a supernatural occurrence. She shook her head. "This is very upsetting. I wish Keegan was here."

"Where is he?" Lily asked.

"Your father had to go up to north Georgia to see about a case Ameritech is working on."

"When will he be back?"

"It'll be a few days."

"Where is Iris?"

"Well, since being sick, she still doesn't have much energy and so she's in the den watching *Swan Lake*."

"Again?"

Lizzy smiled and nodded. "She's obsessed."

Justice smiled. "You're talking about the ballet?"

"Yes. She loves ballet."

"Well, if a child has to become obsessed with something, that's not a bad thing, right?"

Lizzy giggled. "Right. She's also obsessed with watching Gabe's videos. She watches them over and over."

"Again, not a bad thing," Justice said.

"Mom," Lily began. "I'm so tired. Do you need me to help you with anything, or would it be okay if I go lay down for awhile?"

Lizzy frowned. "No, sweetie, if you're tired, go take a nap."

Justice took Lily's hand. "I'll help you up to your room, Lily, and then I'm gonna go talk to Granddad about this latest thing. Enough is enough. We have to do better." He turned to Lizzy. "Mrs. Tanner, while your husband is out of town, if you need anything, I'm available for you."

"Oh, thank you, hon. That's sweet. I'll add you to my list."

"Your list?"

She nodded. "Um hmm, John Appel, Chaz Stewart, Nolan Sawyer, CJ Blackmon, Jericho Jones and all five of his employees."

Justice nodded. “Well anyway, sounds like I’m in some good company.”

“You are indeed.”

✝✝✝

January 25th Saturday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Cam checked himself in the large bathroom mirror and smiled as his beautiful wife came up behind him.

“You look very handsome,” she said softly.

“Thanks.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Are you reading me?”

“Sorry.”

He smiled. “I wouldn’t call it nervous. I may be a bit anxious.”

“I get it. How long has it been since you saw your parents?”

He sighed. “It’s been almost ten years. I’m thirty now. I saw them briefly when I was a junior in college.”

Jeffy sighed. “So, how old is your mom?”

“She’s fifty-five.”

Jeffy nodded. “She actually doesn’t look too bad.”

“Well, I probably wouldn’t even recognize her on the street if Joey hadn’t given me the surveillance photos. Actually, she hasn’t aged too badly, though your mom is ten years older and looks ten years younger than my mother. Though, comparing her to your mom isn’t really fair. Compared to Shelley, most people don’t age well.” He looked at his own face. “So, I guess *I’ve* changed quite a bit, don’t you think?”

Jeffy laughed. “Yes. You changed from a boy into a hunky man.”

Cam sighed. “I wonder what she’ll think of me.”

“It doesn’t matter, Cam. Think of it this way,” Jeffy said, looking at his face in the mirror. “You have nothing to prove to her. If she doesn’t appreciate that her son has grown into an amazing, strong, accomplished, highly intelligent man with a wife and beautiful son, then she is unworthy of you, not the other way around.”

Cam nodded. “I think I’m second guessing my decision a little bit. I mean, she and my father didn’t ever see my worth or value, so, why did I even reach out?”

“Because you forgave them. You let go of that resentment, babe. I’m so proud of you for that. And you’re giving them a chance to meet their grandson. It will be interesting to see how she reacts. And if she acts indifferent or untouched, then, well, you gave her a chance and then you just let her go, this time for good. *You* just don’t forget that you are an amazing man, Cameron Wallace. *My* father and mother see your great worth and love you very much and are so proud of you. My brothers and sister feel the same way. They are proud of you and they love you.”

She put her arms around his waist and hugged him tight. “And now, Cam, you have your great grandfather, and he sees your worth and loves you and is so very happy that he found you. Your parents are an anomaly.”

He turned around and pulled her close. She smiled up at him. “Oh, Cam, I’m so

glad that you didn't give up on me. I have loved you for so long and I am so grateful that God brought us together. You went to extreme measures to make sure that you and I could marry and be happy together, and to me, you are absolutely remarkable, brilliant, and amazing."

He chuckled. "You're good for the ego."

She raised her head with a thoughtful look. "Ah, well, she's here." Jeffy reached up and gently pulled a few strands of his hair down over his forehead. "There. So cute."

He rolled his eyes. Leaned down and kissed her. "See you downstairs."

She nodded and watched him go to Eli's crib, softly touch his son's head, then turn and leave the room.

Cam trotted down the stairs and saw Eric coming toward the door.

"She's coming up the drive," Eric said calmly. "How ya doin'?"

Cam nodded. "I'm okay, I think."

Eric nodded. "You have nothing to prove. This test is for her. Has she changed? Has she become more aware of others' importance? I'm proud of you for reaching out to her. How very gracious of you to allow her to see her grandson. Keep compassion and forgiveness in your heart."

"All he said times two," Billy Wallace said as he too came down the stairs.

Cam looked up at him and smiled. "Good morning, Granddad."

"Mornin' son."

Cam shook his head. "I'm still completely blown away to see you and to know you, Granddad, and that is something I never thought I'd say."

Billy grinned. "I'm blown away too, but, I'll make myself scarce— for now. I'll join you when I feel you might need reinforcement."

"Thank you, sir."

Eric smiled. He was very grateful that Billy Wallace had come into all of their lives. The ninety-eight year old was a strong man. Bright, lighthearted, intelligent, and filled with a bright light of the Holy Spirit.

"I'll just head to the kitchen to see my new good friends," he said referring to the Quinns.

Eric nodded. "Shelley and the kids have gone for a walk on the beach, but make yourself at home."

"Will do."

Eric turned and smiled at Cam. "Ready?"

"Yes sir."

They opened the front door and watched a silver Lexus pull up. Cam hurried down the steps to open the door of the Uber for his mother. He offered his hand and pulled her to her feet.

He smiled kindly and nodded. "Mom, it's nice to see you. You're looking very well." He thought maybe he'd give her a hug, but patted her hand instead.

"Cameron? Is that really you! Wow, I mean, you look completely different. How long has it been?"

He frowned. "Ten years."

"Has it been that long? Time flies I guess. Well, you look all grown up," she said and then looked past him. "So, this is where you live? You didn't do too badly, now did you? You moved in with a brilliantly rich family. Good job."

He sighed. "I didn't just move in with them. This is my home for now. We are very happy here."

"Oh yes, of course. I would be too," she said with a giggle.

The driver popped the trunk of the vehicle and got out.

"I'll get it," Cam said quickly.

"Oh, dear, let him do his job," his mother said.

Cam frowned, went to the back of the car, pulled out three very large suitcases, handed the driver a hundred dollar bill and nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir," the older man said, tipped his hat, got back in his car and pulled away.

Cam grabbed two of the pieces of luggage and nodded his head at his mother. "Go ahead up."

Eric opened the door and smiled. "Mrs. Wallace," he said kindly. "Welcome."

"Thank you very much, Eric. It's nice to see you again. You have a lovely place here."

"Thank you. Cam, take those to Bree's old room," he said as he ushered Anna Wallace inside through the foyer and into the living room. He smiled at the woman. "My wife is currently on the beach with the children, but Jeffy will be down soon. She's nursing the baby. Can I get you anything? Something to eat or drink?"

"Oh, well, I would simply adore a breakfast mimosa," she said with a bright twinkle in her eyes.

Eric sighed. "Well, I don't have any champagne in the house right now, but I do have some fresh orange juice. Or maybe some papaya juice. Would one of those do for now?"

"Hmm, papaya juice sounds good, thank you."

Cam came back down and headed out to get the last piece of luggage.

Eric gestured around. "Please, have a seat or have a look around while I get your juice," he said and left the room.

She nodded and walked slowly around the giant room, taking in the large chandelier hanging overhead made of wood and iron rather than crystal. She frowned and turned to the windows. The curtains were almost to the very high ceiling and were light and airy instead of heavy drapes. She frowned again. The house seemed giant, light, airy, with no opulence. Simple lines. Clean. But in her mind it was a waste. She was used to luxury. Velvets and brocades and crystal chandeliers. She sighed. At least the foyer had one of those and a marble floor.

This room had hardwood floors with two large Persian area rugs of blues, white and grays. There were three large sofas, in a u-shape setting. Two were a light gray, and the middle one a soft blue. The end tables seemed expensive. Antiques probably. Sitting atop a large light tan square coffee table with drawers along all sides, was a Bible, an attractive brown and blue clay piece of pottery filled with yellow and white roses and

a seagrass tray holding a giant conch shell and two pillar candles.

Eric came back with the juice in a crystal glass. She smiled and accepted the juice and immediately took a sip.

"Oh, now, this is delicious," she said.

Cam came trotting back down the steps. "I've put your bags in the room. Just let me know if you need anything else."

"I will."

Cam took a second to look the woman over. Her once brown hair was now brown and gray. Mostly gray. It was long and perfectly styled, as usual. Her makeup too, was perfectly applied. She wore large dangly gold earrings with pearls hanging down from the gold, and a silver chain around her neck with a medallion of silver and diamonds. It seemed a bit much, but maybe she was trying to impress the Kinos. Her dress was orange colored silk, with burgundy prints of feathers, long and flowy, like lounge wear. It was flamboyant and low-cut, but that was how his mother always dressed. He figured it was to get noticed. It seemed she always needed the attention, or craved it actually.

The Spirit moved and it suddenly dawned on Cam, in a moment of clarity, that she did indeed crave attention. He wondered about her history. He realized he knew almost nothing about her. Not really. He'd never met his grandparents. Were her parents even alive? He didn't know. Suddenly, he wanted to know all about her. What made her like she was. Because people who craved attention, were usually people who'd been ignored, or traumatized in some way. They were people who were unsure of themselves. Unsure of their own worth. The Spirit moved and the epiphany was instant. He'd been wrong to resent her. It was time for him to be the bigger man and see why his mother was like she was. He smiled kindly at her.

"Mom, would you like to sit down and catch up on old times? Fill me in on what you've been doing."

She laughed. "Oh, Cam, you don't want to know what I've been doing. I'm sure it would be very boring."

He shook his head. "No, actually, it wouldn't be boring to me at all. I'm really and truly interested."

Her eyes opened wide, maybe in surprise, but also in, what he thought was fear or maybe sadness. He smiled warmly. "Please, Mom, sit down. Tell me how you came to live in the Turks and Caicos."

She smiled and took a seat. "Very well, if you're really interested."

"I really am," Cam said softly.

Eric smiled. He recognized immediately that Cam's heart had been touched by the Holy Spirit and healing was about to take place. "Well, this sounds like a private conversation. I'll go find my wife. Anna, nice to see you again. Cam, call me if you need anything."

"Yes sir. Thank you, Grandmaster Kino."

✝✝✝

Cam and his mother, Anna, talked softly together for almost an hour. He learned a lot about his mother and why she was the kind of mother she had been to Cam. He

was anxious to share what he'd learned with his wife and with Grandmaster Kino. As he spoke to her without judgement, kindly, showing interest in the path her life had taken, he began to see her not as his mother but as an insecure child who'd never known the love of a family. She was not painting herself that way. Cam could see that she really didn't understand that she had done anything wrong in the parenting department. She was simply living in a way that she'd been shown.

He could also see that she was lonely and sad, though she tried to cover that up. She was living all alone in a small, but very expensive villa in the Turks and Caicos Islands. She had some friends she spent time with, but Cam could tell that she was bored and lonely.

His parent's divorce had come after his mother had been unfaithful, seduced away by a Saudi prince, or so the man said. She'd been duped. His father was actually understanding and forgiving and was now paying for all of her expenses. He'd bought the home for her. He'd bought a car for her. He paid her a large monthly alimony payment of ten thousand dollars. That was large in Cam's eyes, but his mother was complaining that she had some expenses that needed immediate attention, which is why she wanted to speak to his father in person, and why she'd asked Cam for the phone number.

Apparently, his father handled all of the business with his mother through a paid agent who took care of everything. His father seemed to want complete privacy and seclusion. Cam, prompted by his great grandfather, and assisted by his good friend, Agent Jensen Deal, had just yesterday tracked his father down and found him also living on an island. His father's island, though, was in the South Pacific, in Tutuila, in American Samoa. Cam and his great grandfather had decided they were gonna head down there and pay him a surprise visit. They'd thought about calling him first, but decided that Cam had already tried to reach out and Malcolm hadn't responded. For some reason his father seemed to be hiding out, so they didn't want him to take off and change phones. So, they will take him by surprise and see how that goes.

If not for Billy Wallace, Cam would have no interest in inserting himself into the life of the man who had no interest in his own son. But Billy gave him confidence to do it. Cam was now a man, not a little boy who'd been shunned by his parents, and he had the right to find out what was going on with his father.

For now, Cam felt pleased to finally get to know the woman who was his mother. He was grateful for the opportunity and glad that he'd reached out to her.

Cam smiled at the funny story his mother was telling about a feral cat that had decided to take up residence at her home and how she thought he was inviting other cats to the banquet. They both turned to look at Jeffy as she came down the stairs with an adorable, fat, almost three month old baby boy in her arms.

Jeffy smiled as she entered the living room. Cam and Anna both rose.

"I hope I'm not interrupting too much," Jeffy began, "but this guy was really anxious to get to meet his grandmother." Jeffy smiled and nodded at Anna. "Hello, Mrs. Wallace. It's so nice to see you again."

Anna's eyes opened wide. "Oh, well, hello, Jeffy, right?"

"Yes, Mom, this is Jeffy."

"Well, you are all grown up and very beautiful."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wallace," Jeffy said smoothly. She moved forward. "Here, Cam, take your son while I give your mom a hug."

"Oh!" Anna said with a gasp as Jeffy handed the baby to Cam and hugged her.

Jeffy pulled away and looked into the woman's eyes. Cam smiled. He knew his wife was reading her and had probably been monitoring the entire conversation. He watched her now as she glanced back at him, her eyes moist with unshed tears. A brief frown furrowed her brow and Cam wondered what troubled her. Finally, Jeffy nodded and sighed as if in acceptance. "Well, you look absolutely beautiful yourself, Mrs. Wallace. I love the bright color of your dress. It's simply lovely and has an island feel to it."

Anna smiled. "Oh, well, thank you so much. I think most of my clothing now has an island vibe and I'm glad you picked up on it!"

Cam couldn't contain his joy. His Jeffy was so perfect. "Mom," he said softly. He stepped closer. "Let me introduce you to our son. This little guy," he said as he bounced him, "is Elijah."

She looked into the child's face and her eyes opened wide. "Oh my, little guy, you look just like my Cameron did when he was a baby."

Cam smiled. Eli reached out to touch Anna's face and she gasped. Her eyes moistened and she placed her hand over the tiny fist.

"Oh, well, hello there," she said sweetly, obviously affected by the child's beautiful loving spirit.

"Would you like to hold him?" Jeffy asked.

Anna's eyes opened wide. "Oh, I mean, will he let me? I don't want to make him cry."

"He'll let you," Cam said. "Eli loves everyone." Before she could refuse, he held him out to his mother who carefully took him in her arms.

She smiled at him and gave a tiny bounce. "Well hello there, little Eli," she said softly. "My goodness aren't you a big boy! Oh, you really are just so very sweet, aren't you?"

Jeffy and Cam looked at each other and turned to smile at Cam's mother holding their son, holding her grandson.

"Let me get a pic of that," Shelley said as she came into the room, her phone already taking dozens of pictures.

Shelley moved closer. "Hello Anna," Shelley said. "It's so nice to see you again. You are looking as beautiful as ever."

Anna smiled and nodded, still holding Eli. "Well thank you, Mrs. Kino, and it's nice to see you too."

"Oh, please, call me Shelley." She smiled. "Well, I just wanted to poke my head in. We were trying to give you some good time to talk to Cam and wind down, and now you can have some time to get to know your grandson and your daughter-in-law. We'll have some lunch ready in about an hour. When you're ready, Jeffy and Cam can show

you to your room. It's been an exciting day and I imagine you might need to rest."

"Yes, I think I do. Thank you, Shelley."

"You're so welcome. So, the children and I will be downstairs working on some music lessons. If you need me, just call me, Jeffy."

"Will do," Jeffy said.

"The children?" Anna asked.

"Oh, you don't know about the children?" Shelley asked. She laughed. "I'll let Jeffy and Cam fill you in. It's a crazy story." She smiled. "And we also currently have some other house guests," Shelley said. "We'll introduce you at lunch. So, I'll see you later."

They watched as Shelley left the room.

Cam smiled. "So, Mom, sit down, because I know he's heavy. We'll talk for a few more minutes and then I think Jeffy will show you to your room and let you unpack and rest."

Anna nodded. "Okay, that sounds like a good idea because I think the traveling and all the excitement is catching up with me."

✝✝✝

January 25th Early Saturday Evening

The Moonlighter, Rome, Georgia

Keegan Tanner sat outside the club in what appeared to be a delivery van, listening to one of the three undercover agents he had working this job. He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. It was Agent Merrill speaking.

"Emery, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be at your apartment with your mother," Agent Merrill said.

Keegan watched through Merrill's body cam as the girl glanced around worriedly. She was the sister of the main suspect, Chief of Police, Moss Hunt and the daughter of the other main suspect, Retired Chief of Police, Darnell Hunt. Both were also there at the bar.

Twenty-five year old Emery Hunt grabbed Agent Merrill's arm. "I was worried about you. I'm scared. I'm telling you, Nick, you don't understand how bad these guys are. They'd kill their own mothers."

"Or sister," he said pointedly. "Emery, I have people helping me. I'm gonna be okay. Now, I need you to leave and go back to your apartment and stay with your mother and I need you to hurry before you mess everything up. It's all about to go down, now you have to go."

"But how is it going down?" Emery said.

His eyes narrowed. "Why, Emery? Are you gonna double cross me?"

"No! Of course not. I want out. But I'm scared."

"Take her out," Keegan said.

"Sir?" Agent Merrill said.

"Take her by the hand and pull her out here."

"Roger that."

"Who are you talking to?" Emery said.

"Agent Cruz," Keegan said. "Take Emery home, pick up her mother and take them both to the safe house."

"Good copy," Agent Cruz said.

Agent Merrill took Emery by the hand, pulled her out of the bar and to the side of the building. He met Agent Cruz. "Emery, this guy is a friend of mine. I want you to go with him. Go get your mother and go with him to a place where you'll be safe."

"But..."

"I don't have time. I'll explain it all later. Please, Emery. I want you safe. You have to trust me."

She sighed. "When will you be finished?"

"In a few hours. I'll come get you. I promise. Now go."

Keegan watched as Agent Cruz put her in a car.

"Agent Pack," Keegan said.

"Sir."

"Follow them. I don't trust her."

"Roger that."

Keegan spoke into his mic. "Everyone check in when in place."

"It's a go," Agent Addison said from where he sat in a car just outside the city limits, at 'The Rust Barn,' an auto restoration shop.

"Go here," Agent Turner said just outside the elaborate home of the president of the local bank.

"Go," Agent Resser said as he and several others sat outside an old furniture mart that was now a supply house.

"It's a go," Agent Allgood said, from outside a judge's home.

They reported in from seven more places.

"Corporal?" Keegan said. "Ready on your end?"

"We're a go, Tanner."

Keegan nodded. "Let's do this."

One by one, twenty agents filed inside the bar, or stood near the entries and exits, they were heavy, meaning vested, armed and ready.

The next minute people came running and screaming from the bar, but they didn't get far. Every single person was ID'd and vetted before they were allowed to take their leave.

At the same time, busts were taking place in eleven other places in or around the city of Rome, Georgia. It all went down clean. Darnell Hunt and both his boys, Moss and Barry, several of their closest friends and partners in crime, two police officers, two sheriff's deputies, two commissioners, the bank president, a crooked judge, a chop shop with thirteen present, a drug supply house with over twenty present, including dealers, sellers, buyers, and last but not least, two motels were raided, the bases of prostitution and trafficking rings.

Two AMT agents were injured protecting others from an explosion at the drug house, but were okay. A few noses were broken. A few eyes were blackened. Pretty much though, it all went down clean.

The hard part now was processing all the perps, tagging and bagging all the evidence, and listening to all the sob stories. The good thing was, the crooked judge and officers were also arrested and these guys were not gonna turn around and get right back out on bail. Most of them were facing murder, wrongful death, kidnapping, and felony drug charges. Some were facing bribery, extortion, perjury, obstruction of justice, abuse of power, or violating their oath of office. It was gonna be a mess, but it had to be done.

Several hours later, Keegan was exhausted as he gave a full account to Jason, Joey and Jeff.

"Good job, Division Chief Tanner," Jason said formally.

"Thank you, sir. To be honest, we couldn't have done it without Corporal Byron Camp at the GBI, so I'm thankful for him working with us, and of course, for Ameritech."

"I hear you, Tanner. Keeping up good relations with the gov is always a plus, as long as the relations are with honorable guys."

"Understood."

"Have you called your wife?"

"Not yet."

"Do it, and then get some rest."

"Yes sir," Keegan said with a sigh.

"And Tanner, this is gonna be all over the news, so when did you intend to let Agent Blackmon and Mr. Jones in on what went down?"

"I was gonna tell them briefly tonight, and fill in the details when I get home on Monday. They are actually at my home as we speak having a movie night with the girls."

"Good. You can kill two birds."

Keegan nodded. "That was the plan, sir."

Jason chuckled. "Great minds."

"Right?" Keegan agreed with a laugh.

✝✝✝

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."

✝✝✝

Ephesians 6:13

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

The Lord put it on my heart to give two scriptures
and to further expand on these scriptures ...

Honoring our parents doesn't necessarily mean blind obedience, for we are not obligated to follow sinful commands. Forgiving our parents doesn't mean we have to approve of their actions. Our Father simply asks us to release resentment, let go of ill

feelings and give them grace, just as we believe in Christ's grace for ourselves, no matter what we've done.

Give that same grace to your parents.

Chapter Twenty-Three

January 25th 11:15 PM Saturday Night
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

The Tanner den was currently occupied by seven people. Lizzy, and the babies, Gentian and Isaiah, Rose, Jericho, and Violet and CJ. Heather and Nolan were spending their evening with Laynah and the rest of the Stewart bunch. Justice and Thomas Sawyer were at the Inn with John and Jodi Appel, discussing the problem with *Lily's Place*. Lily wasn't feeling well and had gone to bed early. Iris too, still wasn't completely better and Daisy had put her to bed and then gone to keep Lily company.

Lizzy pulled up her phone and checked the time.

Rose paused the movie. "Mom," Rose said. "Are you worried about Dad? Because that's the third time you've checked your phone in the last ten minutes. I'm sure he's okay. Are you really worried?"

Lizzy looked up at her daughter, her eyes wide because she'd been caught. She shrugged. "Maybe a little."

CJ smiled at her. "Mrs. Tanner, if anything had gone wrong, I'm sure you would've heard by now."

Lizzy sighed and nodded.

Violet looked up at CJ. "How come you're not in on this bust?"

Rose and Lizzy glanced at each other.

CJ shrugged. "Your dad said it was no big deal and that I should take the opportunity of a Saturday night off and spend it with you."

Jericho frowned. "Well, if it was no big deal then why does he have to be there in person?"

Rose smiled. "Well, he said there were some new agents that he personally wanted to supervise."

"That's odd," CJ said. "I mean, I heard that Senior Agent Brayden Turner was in on this bust, so why would your dad also need to be there?"

Rose shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Where is all this happening?" Jericho asked.

Lizzy hesitated.

"Well, I know it's somewhere up in north Georgia," Rose said quickly.

Jericho looked at her. "You seem to know a whole lot about this."

Rose swallowed. "Well, you know how Dad and I talk about stuff."

"So then, tell us what you know," Jericho said.

Rose's face paled. "Well, um..."

Jericho's eyebrows shot up. "Rose Tanner, you're acting strange. Are you lying to me about something?"

She shook her head. “Well, not actually lying.”

“Then what?”

“I, um, just can’t tell you what I know.”

“Why not?”

“Because Dad asked me to keep it to myself, I mean, just until he has a chance to tell you himself.”

Jericho frowned. “Are you saying that what your dad is doing tonight has something to do with me?”

Rose glanced at CJ and back to Jericho. “Um, well...”

“I thought we said from the beginning that we would never lie to each other. That we would always be truthful with one another.”

Rose sighed. “Well, actually, I’m not lying and I AM being truthful. I know what’s going on with this mission tonight and I was asked by my father to keep it to myself. That’s the truth.”

“It involves me and he is up in north Georgia,” Jericho muttered.

“Does it involve me too?” CJ asked.

Rose sighed. “You guys are making this very hard on me.”

“So, it does involve me,” CJ reasoned. “It involves both Jericho and I and since we are both from the same town in north Georgia, I’m guessing it’s something going down in Rome?”

Lizzy’s phone buzzed and she breathed a sigh of relief. “Hold that thought, guys,” Lizzy said. “It’s Keegan.” She put the phone to her ear. “Hey Keegan, are you okay?”

“Hello my love. Yes, I’m fine. Everyone is fine and mission is accomplished.”

“Oh, thank God.”

“I have. Are CJ and Jericho still there?”

“Yes they are and you called just in time because they were just becoming suspicious as to why you were working in north Georgia and CJ wasn’t involved.”

“Okay, babe, put me on speaker.”

Lizzy pushed the button and held out the phone. “You’re on speaker, Keegan. Go ahead.”

“Hello guys,” Keegan began. “Lizzy says the two of you were just wondering about this mission.”

“Yes sir, we were,” CJ said immediately. “Chief Tanner, does this mission involve our home town?”

“It does, and I had to wait to tell you about it because it actually involves the two of you.”

They two men were silent as they waited.

“It’s late and I’m very tired and so we will go over all the details when I get home on Monday. Let me see if I can put this in a nutshell.” He took a few seconds to think. “After I heard both your CJ, and Jericho’s version of what happened to you up here in Rome ten years ago, I knew, as did you, that something wasn’t quite right. I knew that a Fire Marshall would not get his report wrong about a fire caused by faulty wiring, when it was indeed arson using an accelerant. No way. I decided to launch an

investigation.

"I had a friend, former FBI, who is now GBI and I contacted him and together we investigated the incident. Well, that turned into something much bigger, bigger than even I could imagine. Okay, back to the nutshell. The guys with the masks that broke into your family's home ten years ago, CJ, were Moss Hunt, Barry Hunt and a guy named Chris Tapley."

Both Jericho's and CJ's eyes opened wide.

"Wait a minute," Jericho said. "So, you're saying that three guys we went to high school with are responsible for killing CJ's family?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying."

"How do you know? Where did you get that information?"

"We had three undercover agents from Ameritech, and GBI had two. We have recorded confessions from ex-girlfriends, from other close friends, from secretaries and even from family members. We have documentation that cannot be denied."

"Well, Moss Hunt's father was the chief of police back then," CJ said.

"Yes, and he covered it all up for his sons. But they were doing HIS work anyway. Stealing cars, running drugs, they even kidnapped and trafficked girls. Do you remember a girl that went missing your senior year?"

"Uh, Missy Grier?" Jericho said.

"Yes. She was kidnapped. Raped. Trafficked. Impregnated and murdered. We found her remains last week."

Rose, Violet and Lizzy all gasped.

"I'm sorry, ladies. I'll save the rest of this discussion for later with just the guys. Bottom line, there was a huge criminal ring being run out of and around Rome by the Hunts and friends, and the good people up here have been suffering and made to keep their mouths shut. But there are some brave ones who believed, because Ameritech was involved, that they would be safe enough to testify. So there were many who finally came forward. They are all hopeful that all these guys are going away. Myself, and Corporal Byron Camp, my buddy in the GBI, we will see this through and not one of them will remain unpunished."

"So, you did all of this for us?" CJ asked.

"For everyone involved," Keegan corrected. "Once we began, we had to see it through in the name of all that's good. The corruption was deep and it's been one surprise after another."

"My parents," Jericho began. "They're okay?"

"Yes, of course. I had an agent on them at all times to make sure none of this came back to harm them. Not just them though. There are a whole lot of good people in Rome, Georgia. They needed rescuing. And really, it's not over, but the ball is rolling."

"Moss and Barry Hunt had a sister," CJ said. "Was she involved?"

"Emery Hunt was a victim. Moss trafficked her to pay off a debt. She's one who will testify to everything going down. She and her mother will be in protective custody until all of the trials are over."

"This is so sad," Lizzy said. "So many lives ruined."

"And all for greed," Rose said.

"Well, it started out not for greed, but for survival. If instead we as humans would turn to God rather than turn to crime, it would be a beautiful thing. There were obstacles in Darnell Hunt's way to a prosperous and happy life. It was a test he failed. What happens to him now is between him and God."

"So, Mr. Tanner," Jericho began. "Why did you leave us out of the investigation?"

"I didn't want you to suffer through the pain and anguish as we uncovered every detail. Now, I can show you the whole thing. It's still gonna hurt. But it's a done deal and you don't have to stress or worry."

CJ breathed a deep sigh. "I can't thank you enough, Chief," CJ said, giving him the respect of his title.

"You don't have to thank me. Anytime any of us comes across injustice, we try to right-the-wrong, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"That's part of our job description, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"And so, it's done."

Jericho sighed. "Mr. Tanner, do you think these guys have long arms? I mean, other gangs or cartels who would try to keep all this from going to trials etcetera?"

"We, Jason and Byron and I, are not naive enough to think that they are not a part of a bigger operation. Especially with the Rome operation going on for so long. And so, Byron is awake and aware and setting some traps. And by the way, I've assigned an agent to watch over your brother, Jericho. But I think you should give him a call and let him in on what went down and tell him to be extra careful for awhile."

"So, the bad guys all know that this was triggered by what happened at my home ten years ago?" CJ asked.

Keegan sighed. "Not really. Your names never came up. We now have so much more than what triggered the investigation that we don't even need you to testify. However, the bad guys probably know that you, CJ, are with Ameritech, and it will be known that you too, Jericho, are now associated with Ameritech. All they need is the link between you guys and AMT to think you had something to do with the initial investigation."

"Well then that means Rose and Violet could be in danger," CJ said.

"Yes. Possibly," Keegan agreed. "Which is why we will keep an agent with them for awhile. Once things go to trial, we should be good. Guys, it's late. I will fill you in on all the details on Monday."

"Yes sir," CJ and Jericho both said.

"Okay, so goodnight everyone. Lizzy, take me off speaker and we'll chat a moment or two."

Lizzy smiled. "Okay, honey, I'm here."

"Don't let any of this worry you, baby. I'll make sure you're all safe."

"I believe you."

"Good. And it's late and you and the babies should be in bed."

"Well, now that you've called and I know it's over I'll be able to sleep."

"Good. I love you, Elizabeth."

"Love you too, Keegan Tanner."

✝✝✝

January 25th 8:15 PM Saturday Evening

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Gabe and Taylor walked along the beach hand in hand. They both wore warm, cozy sweatshirts to ward off the cooler night air. Gabe had now completed two weeks of JETT training, and he felt like it'd been more like two years. His respect for all the agents grew as he began to realize just how hard they'd had to work and how much they'd been through in order to become an agent at Ameritech. He was tired, but he knew he had to power through every single day. That had been his father's advice. He said to try to not think about completing the training, don't think about how many months can you keep this up, just get through each day. Focus on what needs to be done each day. One day at a time.

Taylor looked up at him as they walked slowly along the beach. She squeezed his hand and he turned to smile at her.

"Was it a hard week?" she asked.

Gabe sighed. He was beginning to understand why soldiers don't like to talk about things. It was because there was really no way to make others understand what they'd been through. But he also knew that he had to try to communicate his thoughts and feelings to his girl, who would be his wife. He couldn't keep it inside. If he wanted a good relationship with Taylor, he had to try to share. He knew his own father talked everything over with his mom. He stopped and looked down at Taylor's beautiful face. "Yeah, it was a hard week. Let's sit a minute."

They sat down together on the sand. "It's been a *really* hard week," he said again. "I didn't realize it would be as hard as it is. I'm tired." He went on to describe some of the harder things he'd worked on all week.

Taylor shook her head and put her hand on his face. "Oh, Gabe, I'm so proud of you. You're such a bruh."

He chuckled. "A bruh?"

"Yeah, you know, a tough guy, who is really good at pretty much everything and who stays strong no matter what."

Gabe smiled. "Thanks, babe, for the ego boost." He leaned over and kissed her for the hundredth time since he'd arrived at the house.

Pulling back, he smiled at her. "Tell me what *you* did all week."

"Hmm, I went to dance class twice, and went to youth night at *Hopewood*, and had some good talks with Kaylee and Mika." She smiled. "Mika's mom is gonna be the new assistant manager for the apartments, and also, I think Agent Thomas and Mika's mom are interested in each other. And of course, you know Desi had her baby because your prayer warriors prayed for her. And also, at dance class, I've been assigned a contemporary dance number solo for the recital! It's gonna be with one of the two principal male dancers at the school and it's a huge privilege."

Gabe's eyes opened wide. "Oh, wow, Tay, that is wonderful!"

She smiled. "Yeah it is. I'm so excited. The dance will be to John Legend's '*All of Me.'*"

Gabe frowned. "Sounds like it's gonna be a dance with a lot of lifts."

Taylor giggled. "Maybe. Probably."

Gabe nodded. "Well then, I look forward to seeing you dance it. Even if it is with another guy."

"Thanks. Speaking of another guy, at school I've been assigned a group project with a guy."

"Cool. What kind of project?"

"It's a service to community project and we are going to be working on three things. Clean up the area out at Jump Park next to the senior center. Plan a lunchtime event at the park for the seniors. And the main part is set up a volunteer program for others to come in and work with the seniors on a regular basis."

"Wow. That sounds like a time-consuming project."

Taylor nodded. "I know, right? But Aidan is positive that we can do this easily. He's a real gung ho type of guy, kind of like you. So, he already has volunteers from the middle school near Jump Park to come meet us next Saturday morning to do a clean up. And he just happened to know a guy that does yard cleanup for free and posts videos of it online and he put me in touch with that guy who was apparently a big fan of Dad, and so, he's gonna come and do most of the hard work."

Gabe nodded. "Wow. Good job."

Taylor nodded. "Yep, though it was mostly Aidan. He's a good guy. I think you'd like him."

Gabe nodded. "Sounds like it. Maybe I'll get to meet him one day. I am planning to come to youth night this next Wednesday."

Taylor gasped in surprise. "Really?"

He grinned. "Yes really."

She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed. "Oh, Gabe that just makes me so happy."

He pushed her back on the sand and kissed her and finally pulled away and stood up and held out his hand to her. "I guess we'd better get back to the house."

She frowned but allowed him to pull her up. "Okay." Her eyes lit up. "Let's go have second dessert."

Gabe smiled. "Now that sounds like a good plan. Lily always offered to get me second dessert."

"Oh, I meant to ask, how *is* Lily?"

Gabe sighed. "Well, as you know, her arm is broken so she can't work. But hey, she's alive, so there's that. But from what Rose tells me, she's not feeling well. Her and Justice got sprayed in the face with glass from a window that exploded right in front of them."

Taylor frowned. "How does a window explode?"

"Good question. Don't know. But anyway, she's okay, and Justice is okay, but they

have several cuts on their faces. And Iris is still not all the way back to her old self, so that infection must have been a strong one."

"Oh, poor Iris. I miss her. She's such an amazing little girl. So bright and smart and happy all the time."

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, I sorely miss her too. It's gonna be a long time before I'll be able to fly home and see her again," Gabe said as they got to the house and headed to the kitchen.

Taylor watched him. He sounded so down. Not like his usual self. She touched his hand and stood close. "After we have dessert, will you come to my room?"

He smiled. "Sure. But not for too long."

"Hey guys," young Eric said as they came into the kitchen. "Second dessert?"

Gabe laughed. "How'd ya know?"

"Great minds," young Eric quipped, as he pulled a gallon of ice cream from the freezer.

"Where's Jordan?" Taylor asked.

"She and I had dinner at the restaurant and then she stayed to spend some time with her family and I came on home."

"How's her softball looking? Does it look like they're gonna have a good season?" Gabe asked.

Young Eric nodded with a smile. "Guys, she is so good. I'm really glad she decided to stick it out at college and play. She's a killer. And she's so quick. Such good reflexes. You know, she wanted me to see her play. She said she wanted to show me that she really is good at what she does. Man, she wasn't kidding. She is phenomenal and I am so excited for her."

"That's really cool," Gabe said. "I'm really looking forward to seeing some of her games."

"Well," Taylor began. "I'm looking forward to seeing almost *all* of them. At least all the ones in Cali."

"Let's make that happen," young Eric said.

Gabe sighed. "I wish I could go with you."

Taylor smiled. "It's okay. I understand. And I was talking to Aidan about Jordan playing softball and he said he'd love to come to some of the games and cheer her on, so if you can't come, maybe I'll get Aidan to come with me."

Young Eric frowned and glanced over at Gabe. Gabe only sighed and nodded his head.

"Who's Aidan?" young Eric asked.

Taylor frowned. "I told you about him. He's the guy I'm doing that community project with, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, that guy. Well, don't get too cozy with him while our guy is working his butt off to be a JETT."

"It's okay," Gabe said quickly. "I told her to go out with people and have a good time since I can't be with her. It's her senior year and I want her to enjoy it."

"Yeah, well, Gabe, my brother, you're a better man than I am."

Gabe chuckled. “That is so *not* true.”

✝✝✝

January 25th 10:00 PM Saturday Night
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jeffy gently laid Eli in his crib, laid her hand on his back and prayed over him. Cam came out of the bathroom and whispered, “Amen.”

Jeffy smiled and turned and locked her hands around her husband’s neck. “It’s been quite a day, huh?”

Cam sighed. “It’s been an amazing day. It’s amazing that just taking the time to ask my own mother a few questions, how it made all the resentment and pain go away. When I stopped making it all about me and really tried to understand, it’s like, Jesus took over and I felt so much compassion for her.”

“Well, I’ve been waiting all day to ask you what you found out about her.”

“Yeah? Well, I’ve been waiting all day to ask you what YOU found out about her, ‘cause I know you read her.”

Jeffy giggled. “Okay, you caught me. I did read her. But you go first.”

Cam scooped her up and dropped her on the bed and laid down next to her. “So, as you know, I never met my grandparents, not on either side. My father only showed anger when I asked about his parents, and my mother never wanted to talk about her parents. Today I learned that my mother was abandoned when she was a baby. Left on a park bench in a cardboard box. She became a ward of the state of New York, but not for long. She was adopted by a very wealthy couple. Those people took care of her every need.

“My mother said it wasn’t until recently while she’s had time alone to really think about it, that she realized they took care of her every physical need, but not of her emotional needs. She said she realized later, after my father and her divorced, that she had been adopted just for show.”

“For show?”

“Yes. The perfect couple, who was so benevolent as to adopt a little abandoned baby. So, they had a beautiful little daughter, whom they dressed in the finest clothing, sent her to the finest schools, gave her the newest toys, or cars, or jewelry. She was a fixture in their home. A porcelain doll. They taught her all about having the best of everything. They taught her what designers were the best, be it clothing, handbags, jewelry, shoes, cars, furniture and so forth. They taught her how important it was that they provide her with the best and mostly they taught her that this is the most important thing in life. To have the most, be the best.

“That’s what they taught her and as she told me this I realized that was how she took care of me. My parents provided me with the best of everything. I was fed, clothed, had cars and money. They paid for everything I needed in college, though that wasn’t much because I had a full scholarship. They took care of my every need. Except love. I was their fixture. Their handsome, cute little boy fixture.

“I realized when she told me all this, that she raised me the way she’d been raised. It was all she knew. It was what she thought was the best. It wasn’t until she was all

alone in her little house that she realized there was much more to life than what she'd been taught. It actually made me hurt for her."

"Okay, that explains your mom's attitude toward you, but what about your Dad. Did he have the same background?" Jeffy asked.

"No, not the same, but with similar outcomes. She says they met in New York their senior year of college. They both attended Columbia. She says he went to Columbia on a tuition-free program and my mother was in a rebellious stage of her life and she knew her parents would be devastated to know that their daughter was seeing a low-income, tuition-free student. So, she latched onto him.

"Apparently, my father and mother hit it off spectacularly. She taught him all about what she thought was important in life and he was so enamored of her, he followed suit. He got into real estate and started making the big bucks and was wealthy by the time he was twenty-five. That gave them more courage to tell her parents they were going to marry whether her parents liked it or not. But her parents were simply glad she'd found a wealthy man who could provide for her. So, Mom and Dad were given a huge wedding at the *St. Regis Hotel* in New York. They went on a cruise for their honeymoon that ended up near the coast of Alaska. They fell in love with the northwest and the real estate market in Seattle was skyrocketing, so that's where they settled.

"And then, after a few years of playing the socialite game, my mother, at age twenty-four, found herself pregnant with me. She was not happy about it, but finally came to terms with it."

Jeffy frowned at Cam finding out that he was indeed not wanted.

Cam shrugged. "My father made her feel better about it by promising her that nothing would change and they would still have their lavish parties and they would still travel the world and from what I witnesses growing up, I guess he pretty much kept his word to her. But once they divorced and she found herself all alone, she began to examine her life compared to others, and realized something was missing. It was love. Real love. She admitted to me that even now, she doesn't quite understand what it means to really love someone. So, I told her that your family taught me that love is an action word. When you love someone, you serve them. And I told her that the one who actually taught us all that, is Jesus. I didn't really press it. I didn't want to give her too much at one time. Still, I think a door was opened, and she seemed pretty receptive."

He stopped and smiled and shrugged.

Jeffy's eyes were moist. "Oh, Cam, such a sad life. Some people would look at her life and think, 'wow, wish I had a life like that,' but they just don't know, do they? You can have all the bells and whistles and feel so empty. And oh, Cam, she really does feel empty."

"So, is that what you saw?"

Jeffy sighed and finally nodded.

Cam frowned. "What else? I can tell you saw something else."

Jeffy nodded her head and smiled sadly. "Calm down, I'm gonna tell you. I'm just trying to find a way to ease my way into it."

"Is she having an affair with another supposed Saudi prince?"

Jeffy shook her head. “No, Cam. Your mother is sad and very lonely and regretful and scared. Very scared.”

“Scared? Of what? Is someone threatening her?”

“No— Cam, your mother is— sick.”

Cam lay quietly looking into Jeffy’s eyes. “Bad sick?” he finally asked.

“Yes.”

“Some kind of cancer?” he guessed.

“Yes. Brain cancer. It’s called glioblastoma, or GBM. It’s usually a death sentence. It’s a tumor. A highly aggressive tumor.”

“Can you help her, Jeffy?”

“I’m not sure. But I will try. I will give it my all.”

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed and leaned forward on his knees, sighing heavily.

Jeffy rose up and hugged him from behind. “Oh, Cam, I’m sorry. I thought about not telling you. Ya know, just let you have this time with her. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you, Cam. I’m so sorry.”

He sighed and patted her arm. “No, babe, you have to be able to trust me with even the hardest news. I’m glad you told me. I’ll handle it.” He sat quietly for a few minutes, while Jeffy kept her arms around him.

Finally, he turned to look at her. “I guess *this* is why she accepted the invitation to come see her grandson,” he said, his voice filled with emotion.

Jeffy nodded. “Well Cam, let’s go a step further with that. Maybe this is why God dropped it in your spirit to reach out to her.”

Cam mulled that over a moment and then nodded his head. “Of course.”

“And you could’ve ignored that prompting, but instead, you acted on it. And getting to know your mother has been healing and a blessing, right?”

Cam nodded. “Yes. But I wish there was more time. How long does she have? Do you know?”

“I need to actually examine her, but I’m afraid that usually not more than a year, maybe two.”

He shook his head. “Is she suffering? Is she in pain?”

“She had a headache and her blood pressure was high.”

“How about emotionally?”

Jeffy sighed. “She’s sad, lonely and afraid.”

Cam nodded. “So, I can help her with that. I mean, God sent her here to me so that I can honor my mother by helping her through this hard time, and teaching her about Jesus.”

“That would be a beautiful thing,” Jeffy said. “And I love the way you went from being sad for yourself for just finding your mother and immediately losing her again, to how you can serve her in her time of need.”

Cam nodded. “It would be easy to fall into victimhood and make this all about me. Poor Cam, *he* just reunited with his mother and now *he* is going to lose her. But I need to think about how she feels, what she’s going through and how I can help her through

it."

He was silent again as he thought, then looked up. "And she said she needed to get Dad's number for some extra expenses. That would be for the medical treatments I guess?"

Jeffy nodded. "Probably. Though, she won't have to reach out to him for that anymore. We'll take care of it. Still, I think she might want to tell your father some things. She might want to apologize for being unfaithful to him, or whatever took place in their marriage. She might need some closure. And really, he might need the same thing. According to your mom, he's willingly paying all of her expenses, so I'm guessing he doesn't have ill will toward her."

"Maybe not and that is a credit to him. So, I think as soon as possible, Granddad and I will definitely be making that trip to find Dad and see what's up with him."

Jeffy nodded. "Yes, but spend at least a week or two with your mom before you take off."

He nodded. "Of course. And when I leave, she can stay here until I get back, right? I mean, do you think your parents would mind?"

"Silly question." Jeffy sighed. "So, I guess tomorrow, I'll get your mom alone and tell her that I know she's sick. I might need you to help me with her. Does she know that I'm a doctor? Does she know anything about me?"

"I'm not sure. When I think about it, she acted like she didn't really know who you are, other than the little girl I rescued all those years ago and dated for awhile. She probably remembers that you're the sister to Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams."

Jeffy giggled. "Good thing I have such famous siblings."

Cam smiled. "Yeah. Maybe you should work on making a name for yourself."

Jeffy hugged him. "I love you, Cam Wallace. I know this has been a bittersweet day causing a roller coaster of emotions. We'll get through it together, you, me, your mom and Eli."

"Thanks, babe. And I love you, June Flower Kino Wallace. Back in that motel when you were just fifteen, I thought I must be about the luckiest guy in the world. Well, babe, I still feel that way."

She snuggled close. "Blessed."

"Blessed," he agreed.

✝✝✝

January 27th Monday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric Kino gazed around the dining room table as the esteemed guests lingered over the breakfast. There was Alo and Dani Quinn, and Ronny Clark, who'd come to Sunday Dinner and stayed to talk at length with other members of "the twelve" and ended up spending the night. Also present was Billy Wallace, Cam's mother Anna Wallace, and of course, his own Shelley, daughter Jeffy, and her husband Cam. Melody had already taken the children downstairs to teach them a new game she'd learned that teaches letters as they play.

"Well," Ronny began. "I can't remember the last time I had so much fun. Getting

to know you all, listening to all of your stories last night, it has been such a boon to my spirit."

"Ach, Reverend Clark, I say the same aboot you. It has indeed been a great pleasure to get to know you. And the program in your little church yesterday was so inspiring."

"I agree," Alo said. "Pastor Barnes, that's your nephew, correct?"

Ronny smiled. "My grandnephew."

Alo nodded. "His sermon was inspired. And your sum up at the end was like a cherry on top. I really like the way you have more than one come up and speak."

"Well, we don't always. We just go with how the spirit moves us."

"Well, that young youth minister, JoJo Adams, he is certainly inspirational as well. He is a magnanimous young man, and he had me hanging on his every word," Alo said.

Ronny laughed. "Well, he actually is quite a remarkable young man, but are you sure you don't feel that way because he's dating your daughter?"

Alo and Dani both laughed.

"I think it's the opposite," Dani said. "My Alo has been scrutinizing the poor young man and simply can't find any flaws."

"JoJo is our grandson," Shelley put in quickly. "And Raylynn would be hard put to find a more valiant young man, nor could he find a more remarkable young woman. They are a match made in heaven."

"They seem to be," Dani said. "It's so beautiful to see young love developing."

"Agreed," Billy said loudly. "And oh, we have to mention your music minister, Reverend. What an absolute talent, and he too is your grandson, am I correct young Miss Shelley?"

Shelley laughed at the title. "Yes, he too is our grandson. He loves music. He's quite gifted."

"Well I could listen to that boy sing all day," Dani said. "And he's such a lovely young man."

"And I noticed he seems quite interested in your young babysitter, Melody," Billy said.

"Yeah, it's hard to miss that," Cam said with a chuckle.

Alo rose. "I'm going to go grab another one of those muffins off the counter. Would anyone else like anything?"

Shelley's eyes opened wide. "I'm so sorry for being a terrible hostess. Let me get it for you."

Alo laughed. "You're an amazing hostess, but please let me get it. It feels so good to be able to walk in there and get something for myself."

Dani smiled.

Shelley nodded in understanding. "Well okay then. Yes, grab the whole platter and bring it in and we'll munch while we talk."

Alo nodded with a grin and went to get the muffins.

"Anna?" Eric suddenly said. "What did you think about the church service yesterday?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh! Well, as everyone said, it was lovely. It wasn't boring

at all, like one would think a church service would be."

All the people at the table laughed softly and Anna's face turned red.

"I— didn't mean that in a bad way."

"It's okay," Eric said. "Church can be very boring when people are just going through the motions. That happens. Sometimes we lose our connection to God and forget that He is real. We forget that when we pray He's really listening. It takes time to build a real relationship with God. But when we spend the time, really believing and understanding that He is real, the payoff is huge."

"I'm not sure I understand," Anna murmured.

Billy took Anna's hand and squeezed it. "Ach, my bonny lass, when we've been in the dark, when we don't know Jesus, life can seem so hard. But the very first time we hear Him speak to us, or feel Him in our hearts, it opens a door that brings us so much joy. So, we work to keep that door open, through prayer and trying to live worthy, and reading His Word. Once He touches us, and we realize, ach, He is real, we want nothing more than to hear Him and feel Him over and over. We begin to build that relationship and we don't ever want it to stop."

Anna looked around the table. Each of them was nodding and smiling. She looked at her own son. "Cam? So, have you built that relationship?"

Cam smiled and nodded. "Yes, Mom. I found that Jesus is real. He speaks to me, in my head and in my heart and through my wife and her family. He teaches me, He leads me, and He's literally saved my life more than once. Mom, being in His presence, it is amazing and it's wonderful, and it makes me so very happy."

"And how did you come to build that relationship?"

"Well, I had my own personal pastor, I guess you could say. Grandmaster Kino took it upon himself to lead me and guide me. But really, he told me to read the Bible and we would study together about the different questions I had. He told me to try to live as holy as possible, which just pretty much means to live by the ten commandments. Don't lie. Don't steal. Live with honor. Live with integrity. Pray unceasingly. Listen and watch for the answers. Eventually, I began to recognize God's voice. I began to feel when His Holy Spirit filled me and began following the promptings God was giving me. I got excited when I realized God was talking to me. To me! Someone who..."

He stopped.

Anna frowned. "Go on."

Cam shook his head. "No. It was too personal to say here. Anyway, Mom, it was a wonderful time and it changed my whole life and I am so very happy and I would really love to have that happen for you too."

"You would?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

He swallowed. "Because you're my mother, and, well, I love you."

Jeffy's eyes filled with tears as she watched Anna's eyes do the same."

"Even after all these years?"

"Yes, even after all of them."

Billy laughed out loud. “Well, then, sweet lass, that’s a beautiful profession of love from your son now, isn’t it? So, treasure this moment my dear granddaughter-in-law.”

Anna shook her head. “Oh, well, Malcolm and I divorced many years ago, so I’m not your granddaughter-in-law anymore.”

“Ach, lass, you married my grandson, and you gave birth to my great grandson, and you are the grandmother of my great, great grandson, and that makes you my daughter-in-law for life. You, Miss Anna Wallace, you belong to me!”

Everyone at the table smiled. Shelley, Dani, Jeffy, Cam and Eric all had to choke back the emotions.

It was Anna who broke the spell. “Well, that is a very nice thing to say, Billy, but I’ve come to realize that I’m fairly certain that I am not very worthy to be included in this fine group of people.”

It was Alo who spoke in his quiet, soft-spoken voice with the slight Native American accent. “None of us is worthy, Anna. That is the whole point of Jesus dying for us on the cross. He paid for us. His grace takes away our sins and mistakes. He forgives us. All we have to do is accept His gift. It is free. From the moment we accept Him as our Savior we are reborn. We start again all fresh. Most of us sitting here renew that covenant with Him pretty much every morning when we pray before we leave our room, and every evening when we pray before we go to bed. And if the others are like me, we pray many times in between as we constantly turn our hearts and minds to Him. We love Him. And we can feel His love for us, and ma’am, you can have that too.”

She sighed. “I guess, if there’s time.”

She smiled sadly and looked around the table. Yesterday, Jeffy, who Anna found was the famous Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace, confronted her about her illness. Anna was stunned by her accurate diagnosis by only placing her hands on her head and over her heart. Jeffy was a special young lady, and she intended to do all she could to help Anna. Last night, after dinner as the men spoke about their different miraculous experiences, Anna wondered aloud if maybe God could work a miracle for her. She allowed Jeffy to share her diagnosis and prognosis with the group. They’d all joined together to give her a blessing and she’d felt immediately at peace. But she also felt like she would not be healed. She wondered now if that was God talking to her, telling her ‘no.’

“There’s time,” Eric said softly. They all turned to look at the strong man at the head of the table because though he’d spoken softly, his voice seemed to rumble like distant thunder. He went on. “Anna, I don’t know yet if God would have you live another few weeks, another few months, another year or two, or another ten years. But even if it was just another hour, there is still time. I know that you heard myself, Alo, Ronny and Billy each tell of our meeting with an angel when we were ten years old. What do you think about that?”

Anna sighed and shook her head. “Well, it seems almost unbelievable, but, for you four to each have similar stories and you didn’t even know each other until recently, well, it doesn’t sound like you just made it up.”

“And so, what does that mean to you?” Eric asked kindly.

"Well, I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"Well, you said that you don't think we're lying about it. Which means that you must believe us, right?"

"Yes."

"And if you believe that we each had angels appear to us, then can you believe that there is so much more going on in this life that we can't understand?"

"Yes, that seems logical."

"Well, Anna, let me testify to you, Anna Wallace, that God has shown me that He is very real."

Again, Eric's voice changed. It deepened. It reverberated. It held power and again, they all quieted and stared at him.

"Jesus came to this earth, the only begotten Son of the Father, to be born of a virgin. He lived a perfect life, in prayer, in honesty, teaching and serving. He knew that He would be put do death. He allowed himself to be put to death. He was the perfect sacrificial lamb. The Lamb of God. There were many witnesses to His death. When it was finished, He was laid in a tomb and it was sealed. Three days later, the tomb was empty because Jesus had risen. He overcame death. He held the keys. He holds the keys, to life and death, to heaven and hell.

"There were over five hundred people who witnessed His resurrection. He made it possible for us all to have our sins paid for by His blood and for us to be together with Him and with our loved ones. Let me say that again. He overcame death! And Anna, when I died this past August, I saw Jesus, and he spoke to me face to face and I simply cannot deny it. He is love. He is power. He is everything and all you want to do is be in His presence. I want that for myself and I want that for all of my family and friends and loved ones, and even my enemies. And He made it possible."

"But even for me?" Anna said meekly. "My life, it's not what you might call holy or Godly. I partied. I, well, I guess I don't have any secrets from any of you, I was unfaithful to my husband and I'm pretty sure he was unfaithful to me."

"What Eric is trying to tell you," Shelley said softly, "is that once you give your life over to Jesus, all of that is all gone. You are washed clean. Your life begins again. It is like you are born again. You start fresh."

Anna's eyes filled with tears.

"And then my sweet granddaughter-in-law," Billy began. "And then you cultivate that relationship. You read the Bible, you pray, you quiet your mind and listen. You should read Eric's memoirs. He lists in there ways that you can use to draw close to God."

She looked around at all of the sincere faces. "How can you all care so much about one lonely old lady?"

Dani smiled. "We can because we have the love of Jesus in our hearts. It's such a lovely, happy feeling. His love for us teaches us how to love others. And we do, Anna. I barely know you, but I feel such love and compassion for you."

"This is almost too much," Anna said.

Cam eyed his mother, smiling at the way the Spirit was touching her.

"Ach," Billy exclaimed. "Just wait. We have three more of the twelve arriving today and three arriving tomorrow."

Cam counted. "So, that means there will be ten of the twelve here by tomorrow? That is so cool!"

"I think it's gonna be amazing," Jeffy said.

"So, who's not coming?" Anna asked.

Eric nodded. "Well, the only other one we know of is in Pine Forest, Georgia right now. His name is Thomas Sawyer and he can't really leave because they're having a situation that they're trying to work through. And we don't yet know the identity of the twelfth one. "

"Where are they all from?" Anna asked.

Eric smiled. "Who wants to name them?"

"I will," Ronny said. "Eric here is from Hawaii. I'm from northern Cali, Alo is from Oklahoma, and of course, you know Billy is from Scotland. The ones coming in today are Miguel Alvarez, he's from Peru, Lev Vasilyev is from Russia, and Ces Iman is from Australia. Tomorrow Andrew Musani is coming in from Uganda, Sakchai Chen is coming in from Thailand and Henrik Johansen is coming in from Norway. That leaves the one who won't be coming, Thomas Sawyer, who is from Kansas."

Eric nodded. "Very good, Ronny."

He smiled. "The mind is still strong. The body, not so much."

"Wow," Anna said. "I can feel the power in this room right now. It's like an electric hum. I can't imagine what it will be like with so many of these amazing men together."

Shelley and Dani nodded with a smile.

Billy laughed. "Ach, I might need to say some extra prayers tonight to keep up with all these young folks."

The group laughed.

"Are they all staying here?" Anna asked.

"Will that make you uncomfortable?" Shelley asked.

"Oh! No, that's not what I meant. I was wondering if I might need to go to a hotel to make room."

"Anna," Eric said softly. "You are family. We would never ask that of you. We want you here. I know Cam wants you here."

Shelley agreed. "We want you here, Anna. We have twelve bedrooms upstairs and the one down here, so, thirteen in all. There will be nine guests, including you, Anna, ten if we can talk Ronny into staying. Add that to the three bedrooms occupied by our own family, we have exactly enough bedrooms."

All heads turned to Ronny. He smiled. "Well, I'll have to run home and gather some supplies, but I really don't want to miss all the action."

Eric chuckled at his phrase. "It should be a fun time."

"Are there any other wives coming?" Dani asked.

Shelley nodded. "Yes, one more, Hazel is Ces' wife. They are the ones from Australia."

Dani nodded. “I imagine between her and you and I and Anna, we’ll be able to take care of all of these people.”

“And me,” Jeffy added.

“You’ll be occupied,” Eric said quickly. “You have a baby, and I feel like we might need your special skills, so be ready.”

“Yes sir,” Jeffy said softly.

Shelley nodded. “But don’t worry, I also have lots more help. My daughter Bree, my daughters-in-law Bella and Breez, the Quinn’s daughters Raylynn and Kaylee and our grandsons, JoJo, Logan and young Eric and of course Melody and young Eric’s fiancé Jordan. They are all very excited about this gathering and anxious to meet everyone.”

“What about Gabe and Taylor?” Cam asked.

“Well, they’re excited too, but they have a lot going on. Gabe is gonna try to get over here a few evenings and Taylor will try. She’s in the middle of dance rehearsals for a big recital and she also has a big school project she’s working on that requires a lot of time. But I’m sure we’ll get to see her a little bit. And of course, Ricky and Mark and Joey and the Lee brothers are intending to spend as much time over here as possible.”

“Wow. How in the world will we cook for so many?” Dani asked.

Shelley grinned. “We won’t. We’ll pretty much have every evening meal catered. We have many friends who own restaurants so, we’ll give them some business.”

“Well, that will make it easier,” Dani said.

“Sooo much easier,” Shelley agreed.

The whole group quieted when they heard a strange sound. Jeffy rose with a smile. “That’s just the baby monitor. Sounds like my Eli is awake and wanting second breakfast.”

The group chuckled.

“Oh, Jeffy, may I come with you?” Anna asked.

Jeffy smiled. “Absolutely. Let’s go see your sweet grandson.”

Cam smiled and watched them go. The last few days had not turned out the way he’d imagined. In one way it was much worse. But in other ways, it was too good to be true. His heart was completely healed. He had no more resentment. No more feelings of being an unworthy son. His heart was filled with so much love and he was very much looking forward to paying a visit to his father and see what was going on in *his* life.

Shelley rose. “Well, I’m gonna get these breakfast dishes done up and check on the children.”

“Please, Shelley, let me. I’ve been here long enough that I know my way around your kitchen. Go see to those delightful children of yours.”

“Thanks, Dani, I’m gonna take you up on that!”

“And I’ll help you,” Alo said with a grin, daring her to refuse him.

She giggled. “That— would be wonderful.”

✝✝✝

January 27th Monday Afternoon
Main Street, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily and Justice strolled hand in hand down Main Street. They'd spent the morning with Mr. Hanley, going over the progress in the house. It was coming together very quickly. The deck on the north side of the house was beautiful, with large wooden beams and frosted plexi-glass as a roof. The lighting was perfect with four copper colored metal chandeliers along with strings of clear solar lights, and motorized screens that could be lowered to block the afternoon sun if needed. The deck could hold up to eight tables and Lily was excited about the space.

The house had now been completely rewired and a new HVAC system installed. The plumbing was ongoing and they were having to dig up the basement to replace a mix of cast iron pipes, lead pipes and in one place, wooden pipes. Justice told Lily and Mr. Hanley that at one point in his journals, Knox Sawyer had bragged about being one of the first to have modern plumbing added to his home.

Satisfied that the place was coming along well physically, and that there had been no reports of strange happenings or accidents, Justice and Lily had strolled down the street to Joe's and had lunch. They were headed back to where Justice parked his car just past the house and they stopped one more time to look up at it, smiling at the window that had exploded and now was one large double wide arched beautiful picture window made of tempered glass. Eventually it would have "Lily's Place" etched in a sunset yellow color and a picture of the lily logo on each corner of the glass.

Justice squeezed Lily's hand. "Whaddya think, Lily?"

She sighed and looked up at him, moving close. "I think the new window is really nice. And I was thinking that we should go inside and go upstairs to a quiet place where no one will disturb us and make love."

His brow furrowed as he glanced down at her. "What did you say?"

She smiled up at him. "You heard me. You know you want me. I know you want me."

"Lily? What is wrong with you?"

She smiled seductively. "Nothing is wrong with me. I'm just being honest." She reached up and unzipped her tan quilted jacket, and then started unbuttoning her shirt, exposing the top of her bra.

He grabbed her hand. "Lily. Stop. What are you doing?"

"I'm thinking about how good it's gonna be."

He grabbed her shoulders. "Lily." No, it's not Lily, he realized. "I rebuke you in the name of Jesus. Be gone. In the name of Jesus Christ, be gone from her." He shook her to get her to look back up in his eyes.

She looked confused. "Justice, you're hurting me."

He let go. "I'm sorry. Lily?"

"Yes. Um, who else would I be?"

"Lily, talk to me. Tell me what you want to do?"

She frowned in confusion. "I thought we were going to go get in the car and go speak to your grandfather."

Justice looked down at her shirt and gently pulled it together and started to button it up himself.

She gasped and looked down. “Oh, wow, how did that happen?” Brushing his hand away, she buttoned her shirt and looked back up at him. “What is going on?”

He shook his head. “Do you remember what you just said to me?”

“Do you mean that I really like the new window, or that we are going to speak with your grandfather?”

He sighed. “This is bad. This is bad. We have to take action. Big time. No more staying calm and taking our time. This is bad.”

“What are you talking about? You’re scaring me,” Lily said.

“Yeah, and you just scared me.” He tugged on her arm. “Come on, we’re gonna go see my grandfather and your father and John Appel and Mr. Stewart.”

“Why?”

“Let’s get in the car and I’ll tell you what just happened. And it’s gonna upset you, but we have to battle this right now.”

“Okay, but, Justice, I’m not feeling too well. I feel dizzy and nauseated. I’m not sure that I feel up to meeting with anyone right now.”

He stopped walking and turned her to him. “Look at me.”

She looked up at his face, her breath labored. Her eyes blinked. “Oh, I really don’t feel well.” She leaned forward, let her head rest on his chest.

He ran a hand over her back and when she went limp. he lifted her up into his arms and carried her to the car. What kind of hell was this? What was happening was surreal, like something from a horror movie. Of course, he knew God is real, therefore Satan is real. There are forces of light so of course there are forces of darkness. They all knew that, but to have it manifest so openly, so clearly, so powerfully right in front of him. He lifted his head. “Jesus, help us to be strong and fight this battle,” he prayed.

✝✝✝

Matthew 6:9-13

“After this manner therefore pray ye:
Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

January 27th 5:00 PM Monday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove California

Eric smiled as he answered his phone and nodded at the others in the room. "It's Thomas. Hello Thomas!" Eric greeted brightly.

"Hello Eric. So, did the three you were expecting today arrive?"

"Yes they did, and they're sitting right here in my study. May I change this to a video call?"

"Yes, of course."

Eric placed the call. "Everyone," he began. "Meet Thomas Sawyer. Thomas, let me refresh you on everyone here." He pointed the phone and got a close up of each person as he spoke their name. "This is Ronny, age ninety-two, from right here in Cali."

Ronny nodded. "Hello, Thomas. Nice to see you again."

"And you as well," Thomas answered.

"And I'm sure you remember Alo Quinn, age eighty-three, from Quapaw, Oklahoma, near your neck of the woods."

"Yes, Alo, I couldn't forget you," Thomas said. "The story of you regaining the use of your legs is indeed inspirational. I was so happy for you when I heard about it."

"Thank you, Thomas. When I get back home and you get back home, we'll have to arrange to meet in person."

"That would be my pleasure."

"And this, is Ces Iman, age seventy-five. He and his lovely wife arrived today all the way from Australia."

"Ah yes," Thomas said. "It's nice to see a larger picture of you instead of just your face on a tiny little Zoom square."

Ces laughed. "And you as well."

"I imagine that was a long trip," Thomas added.

"Ah, mate, yes it was. Seventeen hours. But it was totally worth it. I can't describe the feeling of being here in the same room with these amazing men who are God's anointed. I'm like a kid in a candy store."

Thomas laughed. "Hopefully it won't be the only time you all get together so that I can join you next time."

"We'll make that happen," Ces said quietly.

"And here is one of our newly discovered," Eric went on. "This is Lev Vasilyev. He is also seventy-five and is from Abakon, Russia."

"Lev," Thomas said reverently. "I just read your story last night. Brother, my heart was in my throat. It's nice to meet you."

Lev smiled. "Nice to meet you, Thomas."

Eric smiled and moved to the next man. “And this is the guy who’s been taking care of him, Miguel Alvarez, and he too, is seventy-five and he is from Tarapoto, Peru.”

“Miguel, I’m happy to meet you. I read your story too, just yesterday. It was thrilling.”

Miguel laughed. “Thank you. I’ve read your story too, and I’m thinking being swept up in a tornado was also a thrill.”

They all chuckled.

Eric moved on. “And last but definitely not least, I’m sure you remember ninety-eight year old Billy Wallace, from Scotland.”

Thomas smiled. “No way I could forget you, Billy.”

Billy laughed. “I do come on a little strong sometimes,” Billy said. “I’m sorry you aren’t able to come and meet us all in person.”

“Me too, but I’m afraid what I’m facing here needs immediate attention. As a matter of fact, that is why I called you, Eric, because I actually need your help. I actually need All of you.”

Eric frowned. “Yes, of course, Thomas. Tell us what’s going on and what we can do to help.”

Thomas sighed. “So, for those who don’t know, I’m here in Pine Forest, Georgia because several generations ago, back in 1827, my ancestor, Knox Sawyer, started a life with his wife Birdie right here. He was the first mayor of the town. He built a home and it is still standing right here on Main Street. We had no idea our family was from Georgia. We found Knox’s journals and it led us here. Then, God spoke to me and told me that we needed to come back here and take back the home, bless it, fill it with light and love and dispel all evil.”

Thomas went on to tell the story of how Justice’s family took on the task and had died and then Justice pulled himself together and came to Pine Forest. He told how his grandson met Lily Tanner and how he felt like they were meant to be and then how taking back the home from the dark forces was not as simple as they’d originally thought.

Thomas sighed. “The darkness, the demons, they are much stronger than we thought. Justice and I have fasted and prayed and blessed and anointed and feel like we’re fighting a losing battle. We had others come in with us, pray, read the Bible, sing hymns, but things keep happening.”

“Things like what?” Ces asked.

“The first time Justice and Lily walked through the house, something pushed her down the attic stairs. Also at one point she was looking out the upstairs window and was talking like she was in a trance and talking about jumping. Then, outside the home, a woman swears the light was red but then turned green and she went and ended up running a red light and had to swerve to keep from being hit and ended up almost running over Lily and Justice on the sidewalk in front of the house. And also outside the home, a guy in all black on a bike almost ran Lily over, and then just disappeared. And the top of a perfectly healthy tree broke and almost fell on both Justice and Lily as they walked. And when Lily was in the parking lot of a grocery store, a man swears

something took over driving his car and it plowed right into Lily and broke her arm. And then, most recently, Lily and Justice were standing out front of the house, and the double front windows exploded and showered them with glass and cut up their faces and necks. They said they'd been declaring their love to each other and it was like the house, or what's in it, was not very pleased about that."

Ronny sighed. "It definitely sounds like they are targeting Lily."

Eric nodded. "It sounds that way, but really, that's how the bad guys work. They target the loved ones of the one they're trying to hurt. And they want to hurt Justice. At least, that's the thought that just came into my head. To defeat the Sawyers, defeat their women."

"I just got the same feeling," Miguel said.

"Aye," Billy agreed. "That's what they've been doing all along. If I remember the story of Knox Sawyer correctly, they took out the youngest daughter and the middle daughter first. Then Birdie herself. Then one of the girls committed suicide. If we trace the line, I bet the women got the worst of things."

"You're right," Thomas said softly. "And God sent us to get rid of this evil and to take back the house, but I am at a loss, and I can't let this go on any further. We must save Lily Tanner."

The moment Thomas said those words there was a large bang.

"What was that?" Eric asked. "Where are you?"

Thomas sighed. "Well sir, I am at the house. I came here to pray and to read the Bible aloud."

"What was the loud bang?"

Thomas rose from where he'd been sitting on the stairs and headed to the kitchen. "It appears some tools that were sitting on the counter top have been thrown to the floor."

"And, you're there alone?" Eric asked.

"Yes. I don't want anyone else here. I feel like it's too dangerous."

"And you shouldn't be there alone either," Lev said.

"I have no choice. I have to battle this evil."

"Okay, Thomas, but you can't do it alone. Please. You'll have my help," Eric said. He looked around. "Anyone else?"

They all nodded in the affirmative. "Yes, of course," they said.

"So, this will be the first mission that God is having us work together," Alo said softly. "It must be important."

They all agreed.

Eric nodded. "If Lily Tanner is in danger, it is extremely important. The Tanners are part of my family and my son, Ricky bought that house for Lily. Thomas, right now, we will all pray together. And then later, we will all seek personal guidance on how to handle this problem." He looked around. "Would you like to kneel?"

"Absolutely," they all said.

Eric moved to the center of the room and they all knelt in a circle. "Who would like to go first?"

"You go first," Alo said quickly. "I feel like God has told me that you are the leader of this group of twelve."

Eric sighed.

"I agree with that," Billy said. "I feel it strongly."

"I also agree," Miguel said.

The rest quickly agreed.

"Very well," Eric said softly, immediately feeling the weight of such a calling. "But we'll mull that over later when we find our twelfth member and we are all twelve together." He bowed his head. "Dear Father in Heaven, we call upon you at this time, first to protect brother Thomas..."

✝✝✝

January 27th 11:30 PM Monday Night

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan helped his wife up from her knees after their prayer. She immediately snuggled down into the bed and he leaned over, pulled the covers up under her chin and kissed her softly.

She frowned. "Where are you going?"

He sighed. "I'm gonna look in on Lily again."

She nodded. She understood, because she too was very concerned about her sweet girl, especially since they'd met with Thomas and Justice and had been made aware of just how serious and strong was the enemy.

Keegan headed down the hall past Iris' room on the right and a bathroom on the left. He turned right, passed the guest room and Heather's room on his left, Rose and Violet's room on his right, Gabe's unoccupied room on his left, and finally to the room shared by Lily and Daisy.

He knocked softly and when no one answered he opened the door and peeked in. Daisy's bed was empty. He smiled as he neared Lily's bed and found them snuggled up together. Leaning over he lovingly brushed a hand over Daisy's head and she opened her eyes.

"Hey Daddy," she whispered.

He nodded. "Hello, sweetie. Just came in to check on our girl here."

Daisy smiled. "She was having a bad dream so I came over to sleep with her."

"Well, thank you for being such a good sister."

"Daddy, is Lily gonna be okay?"

"Yes."

"You won't let anything happen to her, right?"

"I'm gonna give it my all, Daisy."

"Are you worried?"

"I'm worried in that I don't want to underestimate the enemy anymore. Still, your mother and I just had a long prayer over Lily and all of you girls, and we had a feeling of peace come over us, so we know that God is with us in this. What His plan is, I'm not sure, but I'll do whatever I can to keep you all safe from the dark forces of this world."

"Do you wish that she'd never met Justice?"

Keegan frowned and shook his head. “No baby girl. How can I wish that Lily didn’t ever meet the man she loves? Even if meeting him means trouble for her, or for us, finding the one we love is worth it. When your mother met me, I brought her lots of trouble, but she still wanted me with her. Do you think it would have been better had we never gotten together?”

“No, of course not.”

He smiled. “Right. Sometimes, when our path in life bring lots of light into the world, the dark forces try to put an end to us. Look at your brother and Iris and the young twins. If I had left your mom because I didn’t want to bring her trouble, those four people wouldn’t exist and without them, the world would be a much darker place.”

Daisy nodded. “For sure.”

Keegan smiled. “So, we will band together and trust God.”

Daisy smiled and sighed. “I feel so much better already just talking to you about it. I feel stronger. Okay, Dad, we will face this head on.”

“Head on,” he repeated.

“Head on,” Lily added in a soft whisper.

Keegan smiled at her. “How ya doin’, Lily girl?”

“I’m okay, Daddy. I’m not afraid. I’m sorry I scared everyone. I’ll try to be stronger. We won’t let them win. So, Daddy, let me tell you something, I mean, like, what’s in my heart.”

“Okay.”

“I’m pretty sure that Justice and I were meant to be together, just like you and Mom. He’s the one, and I can’t let the bad guys win, because, I love him, Daddy. And I’m pretty sure he loves me though we haven’t actually declared it. We’ve said, I’m falling in love with you. But we haven’t said, ‘I love you.’ Not yet. But Dad, we will, and we’re gonna have a family just like this one, with lots of kids and lots of love, and lots of fun and we’ll have so much fun watching all the cousins play together, all your grandchildren,” she added.

Keegan smiled. “Well now, that’s a very nice picture you’re putting together, Lily. I very much look forward to it. Let’s see, nine children who all get married and each couple has at least four kids, that’s thirty-six grandchildren. I’ll have to build a bigger house so you can all come home for Christmas or Thanksgiving.”

“Ooooh, that will be so much fun,” Daisy said.

Lily nodded. “Or— you could build a bunch of cottages like at the Inn! Like in a big circle all around the pasture behind our house and all our doors can open up into a common giant yard where we can have barbeques and play games.”

“Oh yes, Lily,” Daisy said her eyes wide. “This is gonna be so much fun, all of us together, and all of our kids together!”

Lily smiled. “Sooo much fun. Daddy, we’ll have to build a giant outdoor kitchen and I’ll cook for you all!”

Keegan laughed. “Well, let’s get through the next few weeks first and then we’ll start to put together a plan.”

“Okay. It’s a deal.”

Keegan sighed. “Good night, ladies. I love you both so much.”

“Good night, Daddy,” Daisy said.

“‘Night, Daddy,” Lily murmured. “We love you too.”

Keegan quietly left the room but when he got into the hall, he heard soft crying. He headed straight to Iris’ room, sat down on her bed and ran a hand over her soft curls. “Baby girl, Daddy’s here.”

Iris opened her eyes and immediately crawled up onto his lap. “Daddy,” she cried softly.

“What’s the matter my flower girl?”

She sniffed loudly and wiped her nose on her arm. “I want Gabe.”

“Of course you do, but you know Gabe is in California, right?”

Iris sniffed. “Yes,” she said softly. “Spending the night wif his fweinds. But I don’t want him to stay wif his fwiends. I want him to stay wif me.”

“Why?”

“Because he pways wif me.”

“But your sisters play with you too. And Mommy plays with you, and I play with you too.”

“I know.”

“So, why does it have to be Gabe?”

She thought a moment. “Um, cuz I not scared.”

Keegan thought a minute. “Do you mean that when Gabe is with you you’re not afraid of anything?”

“Yes,” she said softly, as if she realized the reason when he said it.

“What are you scared of baby girl?”

“The bad people.”

“Where are the bad people?”

“When I sweep, dey tell me to come here, but I don’t wanna come.”

Keegan frowned. “What do they look like?”

She sniffed. “Um, dey is mean, but they twy to wook nice.”

“Mean? You mean like they have a mean look on their face?”

“Yes.”

“And how do they try to look nice?”

“Dey smile, but it’s a mean smile. And dey change colos.”

“What colors are they?”

“Wed, and den dey change to gween, and den dey change to bwack. And sometimes dey have horns gwoing out of dey heads”

“So, you see these bad men when you’re sleeping?”

“Yes, and sometimes when I am wake dey come on da TV.”

“Do they say anything to you?”

“Umm, dey say, ‘come here, come here,’ or, dey say ‘I’m gonna get you’. Dey say I’m a bad wittle girl, but I’m not bad.”

Keegan hugged her tight. “No, you’re not bad. You are so very good, Iris.” He closed his eyes. “Father, please, protect Iris. Keep her safe from all the dark forces of

this world. Lord, I rebuke this evil in the name of Jesus. Be gone, in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Lord, shield her with your light. In Jesus' name, amen."

Iris snuggled up against his chest.

He kissed her head. "Sweet girl, would you like to come and sleep with Mommy and I?"

"Uh huh," she mumbled.

Keegan lifted her and carried her into his room.

"Oh my goodness, what have we here?" Lizzy asked softly as Keegan laid the child down next to her mother.

"A scared little girl."

Lizzy snuggled up to her daughter. "Aww, don't be afraid, sweet girl. Daddy and I will always keep you safe."

Iris sighed, maybe in pleasure, maybe in relief. Her body relaxed and in only a minute, she was sound asleep.

✝✝✝

January 27th 8:30 PM Monday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Dad," Ricky said solemnly. "I just want to say thanks for allowing us all to come crash your, uh, angel party."

Mark, Joey, Jason and Justin all laughed and so, did the other six members of the twelve.

Eric chuckled. "Don't be silly, Rick. You're my son. Of course I wanted you all to meet these remarkable men."

"Well, I'm really glad you extended the invite," Mark said. "We feel very blessed to be a part of this amazing group."

"We do indeed," Justin said.

"I agree," Joey said. "It was like, we didn't want to intrude because you already have a houseful, but we were all wondering and speculating how things were going over here."

"Well," Shelley began, "actually, the house isn't quite full yet, but it will be tomorrow when three more of the twelve arrive along with the Okellos and Balon and Sanyu."

"Where are you gonna put them all?" Angel asked. "Because we have room at our house if you need it."

"Aww, thanks, Angel, but we've got it taken care of. We have just enough bedrooms for the three more of the twelve that are coming, and then the Okellos and Balon and Sanyu are going to stay at Joey's and Breez' giant home. And then Jeffy might spend a night or two over there with them, though the Okellos have a full schedule of things they and the children wanted to do while they're here in the states. Apparently, they've made several good friends over their past visits here and they want to catch up with them as well. Aaand, isn't it so awesome that Jason is surprising them with a special person."

Angel nodded with a smile.

"Hart is pretty excited to see them," Jason said.

Jeffy frowned. "Yes, and Moreen told me that Balon is excited to meet some friends he made last year that he's kept in touch with. It's so weird. It's like, my babies are growing up and are already leaving the nest."

"See?" Shelley said, her brows raised. "It doesn't feel good, does it?"

Bree nodded. "It does not. It seems they're little for such a short time."

"At least you have another one on the way," Angel said. "Oh how I wish I'd been able to have another baby."

Shelley smiled at her friend. "Well, you may not have another child of your own, but, Angel, how many foster kids have you and Jason raised?"

Angel smiled. "Too many to count. I know I shouldn't complain, but the feeling is so deep, ya know? And seeing so many new babies born lately, and here both Bree and Bella are expecting. It makes me yearn."

Jason frowned. It was the first time he'd heard his sweet wife talk publicly about her need for another child. She'd always acted like it was okay. She always said she was so busy with the foundation and Jason was so busy with Ameritech, they didn't have any extra time to be parents again anyway. Her inability to have another child was simply pushed aside as 'it's just as well.' He glanced at Justin and Lori, who'd never been able to have a child, and wondered if Lori hurt privately like Angel did.

Angel laughed. "You have five, Shelley. Give me a few of yours."

Shelley smiled. She did feel a little guilty that she was blessed with five new children, while Angel yearned for another one. "Oh no, Angel," she finally said. "You for sure don't want one of my little monsters."

"So, what time are the others coming in tomorrow?" Ricky asked, effectively changing the subject.

"Sakchai is arriving first, about seven in the morning."

"And he's the one coming from Thailand?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Eric said. "And then Andrew Musani and the Okellos will be arriving by about ten in the morning and then Henrik from Norway will be arriving around two in the afternoon."

"Ach, I am very much looking forward to meeting them all," Billy said with excitement. "This is such a gift!"

They all smiled.

Shelley nodded. "It has been so much fun meeting all these men and some of their wives, but even more fun has been watching Eric. He seems different."

"How so?" both Justin and Eric asked at the same time.

"It's hard to explain. Lighter I guess."

Eric's brow creased. "Well, it's been a great pleasure to meet these men whom God has called together. It feels very humbling, and it's like, hmm, what do I call it? Reassuring? I mean, to know I'm not the only one and to realize that for some reason that we don't know yet, there is a bigger purpose. I'm walking by faith, not knowing, but following along, and so are the rest of them."

Jason nodded. "It's like you're a squad, venturing out into unknown territory and

you have no idea what you'll come across. You know the enemy is out there somewhere and you will dispatch them as you come upon them, but you also know there are others out there, those you must help or rescue, or befriend, or teach."

Ricky nodded. "And like a squad of men on a mission, you are forming a brotherhood that can't be broken."

Cam finally spoke then. "Or it's also kind of like the twelve apostles, or eleven I guess. They'd been the closest to Jesus and once He left, they knew they had to go on and though they went separately, they would always remember the shared time they spent with Christ."

"Exactly," Ronny said softly. "Well done, Cam."

The others in the room nodded.

"It's true," Ces said. "We can't always stay together like this. We'll have to go our separate ways. We are from all over the world. We'll eventually go back to our lives, but our missions will coincide with each other and we'll all do the work the Lord has put in front of us."

"Well, I don't mean to break up the party," Joey said. "But we have to get our kiddos home and in bed and I have some work I have to take care of tonight before I can bed down, so, Breez and I gotta get home."

"We actually do too," Bella said. "But oh my goodness I'm so happy to be able to meet you all and Shelley, you know when the others arrive, you're gonna have to invite us back."

"Nonsense. You don't need an invitation. We are family. You come by any old time you want. Surely you know that."

Bella smiled. "I surely do, Miss Shelley, but still, I just wanted to make sure we don't overwhelm you."

"Have I ever seemed overwhelmed to you?"

Everyone became silent.

Shelley looked around. "Okay, I mean, other than when my husband died and I was presented with five new children."

"Other than that, Mom?" Bree said. "No. You've always been a rock."

Eric smiled because indeed she has.

"Before you all leave," Eric said softly. "Let's pray together and let's be sure to include our east coast family, especially because of their current challenges and may I encourage you to remember them in your personal prayers. Let's find the best path for them to take."

They all agreed and everyone took hands.

"Billy, as the eldest, will you honor us?" Eric asked.

Billy nodded with a smile. "I will be the one honored."

✝✝✝

January 28th 7:00 AM Tuesday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Sakchai Chen stood at the bottom of the front steps of the Kino home. He smiled when he looked up at Eric Kino as he came out of the double red doors onto the large,

elegant porch.

Sakchai smiled. “Grandmaster Kino, it is a huge honor to see you standing there in person.” He bowed from the waist and finally straightened.

Eric waited for him to straighten and then returned the gesture of honor. “It’s a great pleasure to finally meet you, Sakchai. A great pleasure indeed. And please, call me Eric,” he said as he came down the steps to shake the man’s hand.

Cam came out the door and hurried down. “Master Chen,” Cam said reverently. “Let me get your bags.”

“Thank you so much, young man,” Sakchai said, somewhat surprised at the title. “How did you know?”

Cam smiled. “My wife and I did a little research.”

“Sakchai, this is my son-in-law, Cameron Wallace.”

“Cameron,” Sakchai said and offered his hand.

Cam bowed quickly and shook the man’s hand. “Sir, it’s very nice to meet you.” He then moved past him to get the two large suitcases.

“Come in, come in,” Eric said to Sakchai. “Are you hungry? Tired? Would you like to take some time to get settled and rest?”

“I am hungry and I am too excited to be tired and I am very much looking forward to meeting the others who are here, and also to having an authentic American breakfast.”

Eric chuckled. “Well, just in case you find it unpalatable, we have some curry rice and pork ready. But if you truly want an American classic, there are eggs and bacon, pancakes with maple syrup, toast, fruit, or protein smoothies, and I think you mentioned bagels with cream cheese in your email to my wife, topped with smoked salmon.”

Sakchai grinned. “It all sounds amazing.”

“Come on in then, and I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

Eric looked the man over as he walked beside him. He was classic Thai, meaning, an Asian look, tan skin, dark eyes, and Eric could see why the man who’d encountered him thought Sakchai might be related to him. He had that Native American look about him. Many people had mistaken Eric for Native American. Sakchai’s longish hair came to just below the collar. Part of it was a very dark brownish black, but was now streaked with gray and had a bit of a wave to it, again like, Eric. He had many laugh lines around his eyes and mouth and seemed very positive and happy. He wore tan knit slacks, a white shirt, a pink sportcoat, which was surprising but striking, and a floral tie that had both tan and pink flowers bringing it all together. Eric smiled at the wardrobe choices. He was very much looking forward to getting to know this man.

Sakchai walked inside and glanced around, his eyes getting wide as he saw the giant foyer, the sweeping staircase, and to his left, an enormous living room.

“Ahh, Eric, what an amazing home.”

Eric nodded. “I’ve been blessed. I have a huge family and when we’re all here, which we all will be later this evening, you will see that the home cannot even contain us.”

Sakchai smiled. “And I suppose that is how it should be.”

Eric sighed. He'd heard Sakchai's story of his meeting with an angel at the age of ten, but he'd yet to hear the story of his life and why, now, at the age of eighty-four, he was all alone. "Do you have any family?"

Sakchai shook his head. "Not anymore. Not blood related. Though I have a large network of people who regularly invite me to dinner."

Eric nodded. "I am very intrigued and I would love to hear all about your life when you are ready to share."

Sakchai nodded. "I will unburden myself to you gladly, Grandmaster Kino." He stopped, closed his eyes and sniffed the air. "Ahh, but it does smell simply delicious in here."

Eric smiled. "I'll show you around our home after breakfast, but now, please come into the dining room and meet everyone. They all arose early because they were very excited to meet you."

Eric walked Sakchai through the living room, up the three wide steps and into the enormous dining room.

"And there he is," Billy said jovially as he stood.

The others sitting at the table also stood.

Shelley came forward from where she'd been placing a basket of bagels on the table. Eric smiled at his wife's radiant face as she approached. "Sakchai Chen, please meet my wife, Shelley Kino."

Shelley offered her hand and gave a slight bow.

Sakchai did the same and nodded in appreciation of the bow and the beautiful woman. "It is very nice to meet you, Mrs. Kino."

She smiled. "Please, call me Shelley and Master Chen, it is a great pleasure to meet you."

Eric introduced Sakchai to the entire group, with his own children being last. He was invited to sit. Eric called on Alo to bless the food and the giant breakfast was consumed.

Sakchai delighted in all of the new tastes and smells, proclaiming his newfound love of pancakes totally drenched in maple syrup and bacon also covered in maple syrup, confessing he had quite a sweet tooth.

When breakfast was over, Eric and Cam helped to clear the table and Shelley, Jeffy, Dani, Hazel and Anna all quickly cleaned the kitchen while the others moved down into the living room, as they continued getting to know each other.

Eric finally joined them and began with an apology. "Well, my new friends," he began. "I have a matter of business I need to take care of. My young ones have been very patiently waiting for days for me give them their martial arts lesson. I've been so busy playing host to you, I've put them off for a few days, but I must keep my promise today."

"Eric, take care of your family," Miguel said quickly. "But, as a favor to us, would it be possible to watch your class?"

Eric looked up surprised. "Of course."

"Wonderful," Sakchai said.

Eric looked him over. “I understand that you have taught Muay Thai in your country, am I right?”

“Ah, so you also did some research on me. Yes, I taught for ten years, beginning when I was thirty. It’s part of my story that I will share with you all later today if you wish. It began as a good time, and ended badly. But I would so love to be witness to you teaching.”

Eric nodded. “Very well. Since there are so many of us, I will teach on the beach this morning. Whomever wants to watch please meet us down there in twenty minutes. You are invited to participate if you’d like. Just let Shelley know and she can provide you with a uniform. We have plenty, in all sizes. If you’d rather watch there are chairs near the stairs as you head down to the beach.”

The group became excited.

“Cam?”

“Yes sir?” Cam responded quickly.

“You and Jeffy will join us?”

“Oh, um, yes sir,” he said.

“Shelley?”

“Yes, I’ll be happy to join you,” she said with a smile.

“Melody?” Eric said as she was running around gathering the children to get them in their uniforms.

She smiled. “Oh, yes sir, of course, I’ll do whatever you ask of me, but tell everyone, like, don’t forget that I’m a newbie.”

He grinned. “I won’t have to tell them. That will be easy to see.”

She made a face and the others laughed.

“We all were newbies at one time,” Jeffy said as she hugged her.

✝✝✝

January 28th 10:00 AM Tuesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

“I’ll get it,” Lily called as she came down the stairs. “It’s Justice.”

She opened the door and smiled. “Hey!”

“Good morning, Lily,” he said softly. “How are you feelin’?”

“I’m feeling much better. It’s weird. I mean, I woke up in such a good mood. I just feel lighter.”

Justice smiled. “Well, I guess our prayers are working.”

“Aww, you prayed for me?”

“Not just me. All of us.”

“Us?” Lily questioned.

“Your family, my family, the Kinos and eight members of the twelve.”

She frowned. “Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Did you tell them what I said to you yesterday?”

He sighed. “Well, yeah, I did. I had to let them know how unlike you it was, and how the bad guys are working on you, like, their method of attack. I’m sorry. I didn’t

mean to embarrass you, Lily, but after I spoke to your parents and my grandfather, they felt adamant that we're gonna need to show force. And well, who's stronger than twelve men, well, I mean, eight men, who've spoken to an angel, who are called as God's warriors? Who knows, maybe they were meant for a time like this, when we are battling demons up close and personal. And there will be eleven men soon, because three more will be arriving at the Kinos home today. But Lily, they know it wasn't you talking yesterday. Don't be upset."

She nodded sadly. "I just feel so embarrassed."

He gently pulled her to him and held her against his chest. After a few seconds he looked around. "Are your parents home?"

She nodded. "Yes. My dad is in his office and my mom is reading to Iris and the twins up in Iris' bedroom. Why do you ask?"

"Because I was gonna do this," he said softly as he lowered his head and kissed her, slowly and gently. When he pulled away he shook his head. "That is not gonna get it." Tugging on her hand he led her to the right, into the formal front living room, pulled her close and kissed her again, this time deeply, lingering for a long time.

When he raised his head, Lily smiled up at him. "That was nice."

He nodded. "It was really nice." He ran his hands over her shoulders and down her arms. "Ah, Lily, how can a girl be so perfect?"

"Hah, yesterday should prove that I am far from perfect."

He smiled, but shook his head. "That wasn't you, and I knew it immediately." Sighing he stepped back and looked around. "I've never been in this room, but I've seen this room before."

"You have?"

"Yes, in that video where you all did church for Gabe when he was sick and you all sang together."

"Oh, yeah."

He looked around and walked to the piano. "Do you play?"

She shook her head. "Nope, only Violet. Well, she taught me a few things on the piano."

"Like what?"

She giggled. "*Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*."

He chuckled. "Play it."

She shook her head. "Nope." She eyed him. "Do you play?"

He smiled. "A little."

"Play something."

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Please."

He sighed. "Tell ya what, I'll play something if you sing."

She frowned.

He sat down at the piano and raised the key lid, softly running his fingers over the keys. "Let me think," he mumbled, then smiled. "I don't know how to play 'Last Dance.'"

"Good, because I won't sing that."

He smiled. "How about this?" He began the intro to *Amazing Grace.*

"Um, *Amazing Grace*?" she guessed.

He laughed. "Yes, and I guess I'm not playing it very well if you have to ask."

"You're playing fine."

"Good. You know the words?"

"Of course."

He nodded and started over and nodded at her. The moment she began to sing he felt chills run over his body. This girl, man, this girl was amazing. There was such a sweetness about her. She moved closer as she sang, standing right behind him with her hands on his shoulders. When she was on the second verse, he softly sang harmony with her.

Lily smiled and squeezed his shoulders and he was in heaven. This, sharing of a beautiful song about the grace of Jesus, being in harmony in voice, but more so in their lives, it was heaven.

They both looked up and smiled as Keegan appeared in the doorway. He leaned against the cased opening to the room, obviously enjoying the concert. A moment later, Lizzy came down the stairs, holding Iris' hand. She came and stood next to her husband, and he put his arm around her.

Lizzy loved that her rough, tough, husband recognized beautiful moments like this one and would stand still to appreciate them.

Justice and Lily sang all six verses. Justice smiled up at her as the song ended. "That was beautiful, Lily," he said softly.

She frowned, suddenly breathing hard, and put her hand to her head. "What?" she said.

His brow furrowed. "I said that was beautiful."

"Stop," she said loudly.

He stood. "Lily?"

She stepped back. Both Keegan and Lizzy came into the room.

"Lily," Keegan said firmly. "Tell us what's happening."

She shook her head. "Someone just yelled at me. He said, 'I won't let you be happy. You can't win. You will die. You can't stop us.'"

Justice took her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. "It's not true. Don't listen."

She whimpered. "Oh, it hurts. It hurts."

"What hurts?" Lizzy asked. "Tell me where it hurts," she said as she placed her hands on either side of Lily's head.

"My head. I'm gonna be sick. Oh, Daddy, it hurts."

Keegan lifted her and laid her on the sofa. "Talk to me, baby girl."

Lily shook her head. Her eyes closed. "I don't wanna talk. I have a bad headache. Just let me rest."

Justice's eyes met Keegan's, the worry evident in both men's eyes.

✝✝✝

January 28th 12:10 PM Tuesday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove California

Eric Kino came in through the kitchen door that lead to the garage. Right after he'd given a martial arts lesson down on the beach, he'd received a call from Master Foreman at the Newport studio. Master Foreman asked Eric if he would come a few minutes early to sign the certificates for the ladies. Eric had completely forgotten that he'd promised to be a dignitary at a large group of new female black belt recipients and award them their belts. He'd rushed off, promising his guests that he'd be gone an hour tops, but it'd been closer to two hours.

He smiled at his wife as she turned from the refrigerator with her hands full of lunch supplies. He nodded at the other ladies in the kitchen, Dani Quinn, Anna Wallace and Hazel Iman. "Hello ladies," he said kindly.

"Hello, Grandmaster Kino," they all said at the same time.

"Hey Eric!" Shelley said brightly.

He came forward and kissed her cheek. "Hello, my Shelley girl," he said as he took some things out of her hands and placed them on the counter. "Where are the guys?"

"They are out on the deck talking things over and they are very much looking forward to Mr. Musani's arrival any minute."

He glanced toward the open glass door in the dining room, then turned back to his wife. "Well, I'm sorry I took longer than I said it would. What can I do to help you?"

She giggled. "I love you, Eric, but I don't presently need any help. I have plenty. Go see your new friends."

He grinned. "Thanks," he said as he quickly headed out to the deck.

"Hello Eric," several said as he came toward them.

"Hey guys. I'm so sorry I'm late. It took a little longer than expected."

"Problems?" Sakchai asked.

Eric smiled. "Not really. But the class I went to address was a large group of women who have all been through some problems and some trauma and had pursued martial arts as a way to move forward in their lives and it seemed I needed to take some time and counsel a few and set up some appointments to speak to a few others."

"You don't have to explain any more, Eric," Billy said. "You could've stopped at 'it was a large group of women.'"

The men all chuckled and Eric smiled and then quickly changed the subject. "I guess you've had the opportunity to fill Sakchai in on the problem in Pine Forest that we're tackling?"

"We have," Ces answered. "And we've prayed together, and we've consulted with each other about what answers we believe we've received."

"Wonderful. And what are those answers?"

"Weel, Eric," Billy said slowly. "We didn't want each of our answers to have an affect on anyone else's, so we wrote them all down on a piece of paper and pulled them out of a bowl."

Eric nodded. "Did any of them match?"

"Oh yes," Ronny said softly, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well?" Eric prodded.

Alo shook his head. "Well, we would be pleased, Eric, if you would share with us what impressions you have about the action we should take."

Eric chuckled. "Is this a test?"

"Hmm," Lev said. "Perhaps it seems that way, but it's more of a test of how well we did."

"I see." Eric sighed. "Okay, but you may not like what I feel we must do."

They all remained silent. Eric smiled at that. He sighed. "I realize that you, Sakchai just arrived, and Lev and Miguel and Ces just yesterday. And Andrew and Henrik will come today too. So, what I'm trying to say is, I realize that you have just traveled a very long way to be here and probably have no desire to get back on a plane for four hours, but I feel like we need to go to Pine Forest and address this problem in person. Thomas felt inclined to reach out to us, to ask for help. He's one of us. That tells me that we probably need to show up and take care of the problem. I mean, why has God brought us together suddenly so quickly? You, Miguel and Lev, you even had dreams about coming here. The rest of you felt a strong urge to come here, and now that you're all here, Thomas reaches out to us for help. I think, well, I think we must go to Pine Forest and do whatever God places on our hearts to do."

He looked around at the men. "How'd I do?"

"I believe you did well," Miguel replied. He reached over and picked up the bowl and held it out to Eric. "Pick one."

Eric reached in and pulled out a folded piece of paper, unfolded it and read it aloud. "Go in force." He pulled out another. "Commute with power." And another one, "Passage." And the others. "Go and show force, journey, make way, a straight trek." He nodded. "Well, that makes it pretty clear, I guess. So, you all feel like the Lord wants us to travel to Pine Forest and take care of the problem?"

They nodded as Jeffy came out on the deck. "Dad? The Okellos and Mr. Musani are coming up the drive."

Eric nodded. "Thank you, honey. We're on the way in."

Jeffy turned and went to greet her visitors. The men also started inside.

Ces spoke quietly. "Eric, I know that traveling is quite expensive and I have some money saved up that I would like to offer."

Eric shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, truly I do. But please, save it for your local mission. God has blessed me, and paying for our travel expenses is nothing to me. God has made it so that I will have the resources to help anyone and everyone I come across. A trek across the US is nothing. I'm not bragging. I simply want you to understand that God's got this. He will provide for me and each of you, anything that we need. And not only in this current mission. From here on out, whatever you need for anyone you come across in your little area of the world, you reach out to me. I have great resources and can make things happen."

Alo heard the exchange and frowned. "Eventually though, Eric, the well will run dry though, correct?"

Eric smiled kindly. "It's difficult to comprehend, I know. I even struggle myself to

understand it. My attorney and his investment counselors and specialists work miracles every day. Things are such that my daily returns replace any amount I can spend. If and when it runs out, then it's time to look up. That will mean our mission is over and Jesus is on the way to collect His bride."

"When do you want to travel?" Ronny asked.

Eric smiled. "Let's discuss it after Henrik gets here this afternoon. Then the ten of us can make our plans, however, I *do* think it should be ASAP."

They all nodded and headed into the house.

"We'll wait in the dining room," Billy said.

Eric nodded. "Thank you. We won't make you wait long for lunch. We'll welcome the guests and be right in."

He turned with a smile as he heard his Jeffy squeal and heard children's laughter. He got to the door and looked out.

Jeffy had Sanyu in a giant bear hug, swinging her around in circles. She set her down and put her hands on either side of Sanyu's adorable face. "Oh my beautiful Sanyu. You're growing up so fast!"

Sanyu grinned. "I'm eight!"

"I know, sweet girl. And you are beautiful, inside and out. Oh, how I've missed you!"

Sanyu grinned. "Me too!"

Jeffy laughed and turned and held her arms out to Balon. "Come here big guy," she said sternly.

Grinning, the eleven year old boy moved forward and hugged Jeffy. "Hello Dr. Kino," he said softly.

She squeezed him hard. "Ugh, hello, Balondemu. Just look at you. I can't believe how big you've gotten. Oh my goodness, I can't believe it. It's as if you're turning into a man."

Balon's smile widened.

"You're almost as tall as me," Jeffy added.

Eric and Shelley laughed at that because that wasn't saying much. Jeffy was only about five feet four inches, if that.

"Well, he'll hit a growth spurt soon," Dr. John Okello said. "And then he'll pass you, Dr. Kino."

She laughed. "Good. That is as it should be. Hello, Dr. Okello, hello Moreen," Jeffy said softly. "It's so, so, good to see you both."

"You as well," Moreen said brightly.

Eric and Shelley moved down the steps and shook hands with and hugged the Okellos and the children.

Then Eric looked past them to the man who stood quietly at the bottom of the steps. He smiled. "Musani Andrew?" Eric asked, using the Ugandan way of stating the surname first.

The man smiled and it seemed when he did that the sun came out. He nodded and moved forward as Eric came down to stand in front of him.

"Yes, I am Andrew," he said in a little bit of broken English.

"Andrew, I'm Eric Kino and I have very much been looking forward to meeting you, sir."

Andrew nodded. "Me as well," he said. He took a step back and bowed.

Eric smiled and returned the gesture.

"Grandmaster Kino, I am deeply moved to be standing here in front of you, in America, at your home."

"I'm deeply moved to have you here." He looked around. "Everyone, come in, come in. We're about to have some lunch. Are you hungry?"

"I am!" Balon said loudly, making them all laugh.

Eric looked at the Ameritech driver who was taking luggage out of the vehicle. "Agent Tuffin? Would you like to come in and join us?"

"Oh, no sir. I have an errand to run for Chief Adams and then I have to join Agent Wallace at the Governor's mansion. They are having security issues. But whenever the Okellos are ready to go back to Chief Adams' home, just call Chief Adams and I'll be right back. So, for now, the Okellos have what they need for the day and I'll keep their large luggage with me. Where would you like me to take Mr. Musani's luggage?"

"If you wouldn't mind, just take it up the stairs and leave it by the front railing. We'll take him to his room later."

"Yes sir."

"Thank, you Agent Tuffin."

"My pleasure sir. And I mean that."

Eric smiled.

✝✝✝

The houseguest at the Kino estate were extremely welcoming to the Okellos and to Andrew Musani. The seven men who were part of the twelve were very excited to accept the newcomer into their fold and told him so several times as they ate lunch. Andrew mostly smiled and nodded as he listened to their chatter.

"So, tell us, Andrew," Billy began. "What are your thoughts so far? What is God putting on your heart?"

Andrew smiled. "Why do you ask such a question?"

Billy smiled. "I suppose because God put it on my heart to ask."

Andrew grinned. "Ahh, God is so amazing. You see, I've been waiting for someone to ask me that question."

Everyone quieted and listened to what Andrew had to say.

"Tell us why you've been waiting," Ronny urged.

"Because sir, the good Lord gave me a message for you all but told me to wait until one of you asks me what the Lord has put on my heart."

The men all sat silently, waiting. Shelley, Jeffy, Dani, and Hazel were used to their men waiting in silence. Moreen Okello shifted impatiently. Anna Wallace thought she might go mad with the waiting.

Andrew placed his fork down and finished chewing his bite of the delicious pasta salad. "Well, I'm not quite sure what the message means, but the Lord has assured me

that you will know, and here it is; we must travel."

The men all took a deep breath, smiled and nodded.

Andrew glanced around. "So, you all seem quite moved. I guess you know what it means. Will you share it with me?"

"Of course," Eric said softly. He went on to tell all about the problems Thomas Sawyer was having in Pine Forest. He told about how his family died trying to fly to Georgia to fix the problem. He told about Justice and Lily and how they are being attacked almost daily. Finally, he told how they all had prayed over the situation and all felt like God was telling them to travel to Georgia with a great show of strength and banish this evil.

"And so, you see Andrew, you just gave us a confirmation that we are correct. We must travel— to Georgia. I know you just arrived and must be tired of traveling, but..."

"But I willingly go wherever the Lord will have me go," Andrew put in quickly. "When do we leave?"

Eric nodded. "I was waiting for Henrik to arrive in a few hours and then we can sit together and pray together and decide."

Andrew nodded. "I think I won't unpack until we make that decision," he said with a grin. "Not that I have much to pack or unpack."

Billy smiled. "Ach, well now, that makes it easy doesn't it?"

Andrew laughed. "It does indeed."

Miguel smiled and then added, "I wish we could have found the twelfth member before we go to do this."

Several others nodded, but Jeffy gasped. All heads turned to look at her.

"Is it Cam?" Shelley asked immediately.

Jeffy blinked several times.

Sanyu waved her hand in the air. "Ooh, Dr. Kino you are shining so brightly. There is a bright, white light all around you. Do you see it, Balon?"

Balon shook his head.

Sanyu frowned. "You never see it."

"Jeffy?" Eric asked calmly. "What do you see?"

Jeffy nodded. "I didn't see anything, but I heard words very loudly. Jesus spoke to me."

"What did He say?" several at the table asked at once.

Jeffy smiled. "He said the twelfth member will be provided. His voice was very clear. Very strong. So strong it startled me."

The men smiled.

"Well now, this is very exciting," Ronny said softly.

Jeffy nodded. "And Dad, I get the feeling that you might be leaving fairly soon, maybe within a few days."

"Hmm," Ronny said. "I suppose I need to call Patrick and let him know he might be on his own this Sunday."

Eric nodded. "Maybe we should all take the next few hours to speak with family and make arrangements. I have already spoken to Jason about possibly chartering one

of his jets, so that would make it easier."

"Soo much easier," Shelley said.

Eric glanced at her, wondering if she thought she was going to tag along, because he felt strongly that the women should stay home." His eyes shifted to Dani Quinn and Hazel Iman and Anna Wallace. He cleared his throat. Here goes. "Ladies, as much as we would love to have you come along, I'm getting a strong feeling that you should stay here where you'll be safe. Stay here and take care of each other."

Shelley smiled and nodded. "I have no desire to drag five little ones across the country to watch you battle demons. I will stay where it helps you the most."

"Thank you, sweetheart. Your support is duly noted."

Shelley giggled. "I surprised you, didn't I?"

The other men looked on with interest but said nothing.

Eric's brain raced for the answer. "Well, I, well, hmm, there's no good answer to that," he admitted, making the others laugh.

Jeffy laughed. "Just to let you all know, my mom is extremely supportive of Dad, but she is also quite...hmm, what would be a good word? Umm," her eyes brightened. "Spirited!"

"Good word choice, Jeffy," Eric said. "I was gonna say a fireball."

Shelley rolled her eyes and made a face. "I have no idea what you two are talking about."

The men all chuckled.

"Tell me it isn't so," Hazel said. "You mean she's not always sweet and quiet and kind and amiable and gentle and charming?"

Shelley's eyebrows rose as she waited, daring anyone to say otherwise.

"She is all those things," Eric said softly with a smile. "But, when she disagrees with you, she is a force to be reckoned with, which makes my life so much more fun, and makes me love her more everyday."

"Ach, very good Eric. That was masterful."

Eric smiled. "Thank you."

The others laughed.

Shelley sighed. "But really, Eric, I don't mean to speak things aloud, because there is power in words, but, if like, the Sawyers plane went down, doesn't that mean that you men will be in danger when you fly to Georgia?"

Eric nodded. "I understand your concern, my love, however, there are a few differences. First, the Sawyers were unaware of the extent of the power of what they were battling and didn't properly protect themselves or prepare themselves. Second, do you think God would get us all together, tell us to go to Georgia, and then allow the bad guys to take us out? I trust God." He looked around the table. "As I'm sure the others here do, and I have to say, I'm not afraid."

Alo nodded. "Spoken like a true warrior, Grandmaster Kino. You mentioned that the Sawyers didn't properly prepare. When you said that, I felt immediately that the Lord would like us to begin a fast."

"I agree," Lev said quickly. "That came into my mind as well."

Eric nodded. “I agree. If any would like to fast, please do, but if you are unable to fast, there will be no judgement because each person is different. Each body is different.”

“Well said, Eric,” Ces said.

“When will you begin your fast?” Shelley asked. “I’m just asking for meal-planning purposes.”

They all turned to Eric. He shook his head. “It’s open for discussion.”

“No, it’s not,” Sakchai put in. “You are the leader and so, Grandmaster Kino, we humbly ask you to lead.”

Eric sighed. “Very well. It sounds as if we might be traveling soon, so, if it were just me, I would begin my fast immediately, because I have this ‘no time like the present’ kind of attitude.”

“I believe we all do,” Miguel said.

Eric nodded. “However, I feel like we should wait for Henrik to arrive and we all begin together. He’s coming in a few hours and he may be hungry and tired, so I think we should offer him a meal an afternoon snack and then this evening, a good meal before we spring a fast on him.”

✝✝✝

Psalm 121:8

“The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

January 28th 2:00 PM Tuesday Afternoon
Ameritech Training Facility, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

Gabe was struggling. He'd completed the two mile run near the front of the pack. He made eighteen pullups, which was phenomenal. But on the forty foot rope climb, he somehow fell off a rope and had to start again. After that, dizzy and nauseated, he slowed. Still he was determined to complete today's course. Now he faced fourteen feet of a four inch wide balance beam. Taking a deep breath, he tried to stop the dizziness and started across, but six feet in, he simply stepped off. Sighing he went back to the start.

Agent Blade came up beside him. "What's goin' on Tanner?"

Gabe shook his head. "Dizzy. I think I might've hit my head when I fell off the rope."

"If you're injured you need to go in."

"I don't want to give up. Even if I were injured on a mission, I'd have to complete it, right? I'd have to get back to safety with my charge, right?"

"Yep, you are absolutely right, so do it Tanner. It's life or death for you or your charge. Concentrate. Go slowly. You can do this."

Gabe nodded and started again. He stopped and breathed about four feet down, got his bearings and started again. It took much longer, but he finally made it to the end. Blade, 'the Knife' as Gabe called him, ran along beside him to the next obstacle, the cargo net. They looked up as they approached.

"You gonna make this?" Blade asked.

Gabe couldn't answer as he walked over to the side and threw up. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, walked back and nodded his head. "I'm gonna make it."

He began his climb.

"Well, Tanner, I'm gonna stay right behind you to make sure you don't fall. 'Cause if you fall on this one, you'll break your neck. Let's go."

Gabe climbed but had to stop several times to get his bearings. Once down they ran fast, jumping three pits. After the third pit, they lifted a hundred pound bag over their shoulder and hurried across the finish line. They were the last ones in out of all three teams. The others stood there cheering them on, even the Black and Blue teams.

Senior Agent Fox, the course leader for the day raised his eyebrows at the last two agents to cross the line. "You two go the scenic route?"

"Sorry, sir," Agent Blade said immediately. "We had a little trouble, but we overcame."

"We or you, Agent Tanner?"

Breathing hard, Gabe nodded. "Yes sir, sorry, it was me, and Agent Blade stayed

with me to make sure I accomplished the goal."

"Why did you do that, Agent Blade?"

"Because he's part of my team sir, and he's been really helpful to all of us, I thought it was time to repay the kindness."

"I see. So that means you're willing to accept the consequences of being last ones in?"

Blade frowned and nodded. "Yes sir."

Senior Agent Fox nodded. "Drop and give me forty."

Blade and Gabe immediately got down together.

"Not you, Tanner."

Gabe didn't argue, but just shakily got to his feet and counted with everyone else. When Blade finished, Senior Agent Fox continued.

"Tanner, how do you think I knew it was you having the trouble?"

Gabe thought a few seconds because his mind was all over the place. "Oh, um, sir, probably because I'm sure there are cameras all over the course that you can access on your watch."

"Why are you sure of that?"

Gabe shrugged. "I mean, this is Ameritech."

All the agents standing around nodded.

"Attention," Fox commanded.

All three teams came to attention.

"Tell me, Tanner, what happened?"

Gabe drew a deep breath. "I'm not sure, but somehow, I lost my grip on the rope half way up. I fell. I started again and made it. But after that, I was a little dizzy and having trouble on the beam."

"Did you think that maybe you needed to come in for medical attention?"

Gabe gave a very slight smile. "It, um, crossed my mind."

The others murmured, evoking a sharp look from Agent Fox.

"So why didn't you, Agent Tanner? Did you feel like it would make you look bad to come in? Did you feel like it would make you look good to finish? Did you think about the fact that Agent Blade would have to pay for stopping to help you?"

"To be honest, sir, I wasn't thinking very clearly. Mostly just trying to not throw up, and I failed at that."

"I see."

"Senior Agent Fox?" Agent Blade said.

"Yes, Blade, do you have something to add?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, by all means, let's hear it."

"Gabe, I mean, Agent Tanner wasn't trying to look good. I asked him why he didn't go in and get medical attention and he said if he were out in the field and was injured and trying to get his charge to safety, he'd have to learn how to do that under duress and he felt like he should give it his all. I actually agreed with his reasoning and so I stayed nearby in case he needed help completing his mission."

All the men standing around smiled and nodded.

"Is that true, Tanner?"

Gabe sighed. "Yes sir," he said, offering a soft moan and swallowing hard as another wave of nausea hit.

"You two get in line with your team."

"Yes sir," they said in unison and moved to stand in line.

Fox moved back so he could see all three teams. "There is a huge lesson to be learned here. Actually, there are several lessons to be learned. First, and most obvious, you don't leave a team member behind. So good on you, Agent Blade. Second, you push through if at all possible, because when you are out in the field, others' lives depend on you. But the big one here is not so obvious, but it's the most important. Doing the right thing doesn't always pay back in kind, not in this earth-life," he added with a smile. "Treasures in heaven, certainly. Sometimes, many times, doing the right thing makes our lives harder. Jesus told his disciples that following Him, teaching the truth and bringing light to others will more than likely lead to pain, anguish and even death. But even that is not the lesson I want to get across. What I want to say is, when life gets harder because you did the right thing, *accept* the consequences. Don't let it get you down, or worse, make you bitter. Accept that sometimes that's the way this fallen world works. There will be a time and place when that is not so, but for now, pick up your own cross and bear it, without complaint. Does this make sense to you?"

"Yes sir," they all answered.

At that moment, Gabe dropped to his knees.

"Tanner?"

In a daze, Gabe blinked up at him. "Not feelin' too well, sir."

"Agent Blade, carry Tanner to the jeep."

"Yes sir," he said and did as asked.

"The rest of you will run back to the dorms, shower, dress and report for your evening meal."

✝✝✝

January 28th 2:00 PM Tuesday Afternoon

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric Kino looked the man over who emerged from the limo that Eric had sent to pick him up from the airport. The man was only two years older than Eric. The second youngest of the group. His face was fairly smooth, but his longish hair was totally white. He reminded Eric of many depictions of Santa Claus. He wore blue jeans, with a collared shirt and a thick pullover sweater, which Eric was sure the man regretted wearing, since the current temperature was sixty-four degrees. Keeping with the Santa Claus theme, the man's smile made his eyes twinkle.

Eric came down the steps and shook his hand. "Henrik, it is such a pleasure to finally meet you."

"You as well, Grandmaster Kino. You as well. I'm not sure I can contain my excitement."

"Well, you aren't the only one. As I told you on the phone yesterday, we have a

houseful of guests who are being very patient in waiting for your arrival. You will make number ten of the twelve of us."

"I'm elated that I'm finally here and about to meet them." He pulled at his collar. "I believe I didn't realize how warm it is here."

Eric laughed. "Many make the same mistake. Though in January, it does cool down at night to the mid-forties."

Henrik laughed. "Oh, mid-forties is it? That's twenty degrees higher than our daytime temperature in January in Oslo!"

Eric smiled and then nodded at the driver who was unloading luggage. "Agent Eddy, thank you so much. Will you take that up the stairs and just leave it in the hall next to the railing?"

"Yes sir."

"Let me help with that," Henrik said.

"No sir, I have it with ease. If I let you help, the other agents will make fun of me for sure."

Eric chuckled. "Come in, Henrik. Let me introduce you to everyone. I'm not sure what time of day it is to you. Are you hungry or tired?"

"Well, for me it's 11:00 PM, but I'm too excited to meet everyone, so I won't be able to sleep. But maybe a little refreshment will be helpful."

"Very well," Eric said with a nod.

They entered the home. Henrik smiled. "Oh my, it's exactly the way I pictured it from your description in your book. Lovely. Just lovely."

"Henrik, I must say, your English is perfect. There is barely even an trace of an accent."

Henrik chuckled. "Well, I am an English teacher, so that speaks well of my profession."

Henrik glanced up to the balcony and saw his luggage leaning there against the railing. Then he saw a lovely woman descending the stairs. He smiled kindly. "Hello! You must be Shelley Kino?"

Eric smiled. "No, this, is my son-in-law's mother who is visiting and getting to know her new grandson. Anna Wallace, may I introduce to you, Henrik Johansen. He's a high school English teacher from Oslo, Norway. Henrik, this is Anna Wallace."

Anna held out her hand and Henrik took it and placed his other hand on top. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Wallace," he said.

"Oh, please call me Anna."

"But what would your husband say about that?"

"My husband?" she said with smile. "I'm not married."

"Oh, I see. Well then, it's very nice to meet you, Anna."

"You as well," she said brightly.

"Come in here and meet everyone," Eric directed, turning Henrik to the left and leading him into the giant living room.

The room contained only men, eight men to be exact, and they all stood with huge smiles as Eric and Henrik came into the room.

Each man stepped forward and introduced himself. The handshakes were filled with strength and love, the smiles broad and filled with genuine interest, and the excitement was palpable.

Henrik shook his head as he stood back after the last one. “I cannot tell you how this feels. I’ve so looked forward to this moment. Every single one of you are exactly how I imagined you to be. My heart is full. So full.”

“I’m pretty sure we all feel the same way,” Eric said as the others nodded. He smiled. “Everyone have a seat. Relax. Henrik, pull that sweater over your head and hand it to me and then let’s all have a chat.”

As they all got comfortable, Shelley, Dani, Hazel and Anna came in carrying trays of snacks. Small finger sandwiches, fruit cups, mixed nuts, a veggie tray with dip, grapes, cheese and chunks of ham on toothpicks. Jeffy carried in a tray of drinks, iced juices, teas and water.

The women were introduced to Henrik, all except Anna who’d already met him. They each welcomed him into the fold.

Henrik sat back and sighed. “I don’t think I could be any happier.”

“Ach, we understand how you feel,” Billy said. “But don’t get too comfortable, we’re already working on our first mission.”

“So I hear. Is there more to tell me since the last I spoke to you, Eric?”

“Yes. As speculated, we have learned that God would like us to travel to Georgia to take care of this problem. We have also learned that once we get there, we will be able to meet the twelfth man.”

“Oh!” Henrik said. “You’ve found him?”

“No. We don’t know who he is, but my daughter had the Lord speak to her as we discussed it and she said ‘the twelfth man will be provided.’ She also said we should make arrangements as soon as possible. I realize that you just arrive and probably have no desire to get right back on a plane and...”

“And go on an adventure for the Lord? Are you jesting? Let’s go! I’m ready to fight any battle God asks. It must be important to bring us all together.”

“True, it must be important,” Ces began. “Though we may not know how important until much later.” He shrugged. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt but that’s just what came into my head.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Eric said. He nodded and drew a breath. “Okay, I think we need to establish a few guidelines. I know that we are all new acquaintances and so we are on our very best behavior. And we are all being very careful to not step on anyone’s toes or walk on egos. With myself being the youngest, I feel the weight of that. But I’d like to suggest that in our interactions, we let go of any pride or ego and we understand that each of us has been called, chosen, for whatever reason, and each person’s opinion is important. What each of you have pop into your heads is important.”

He stopped and smiled. “So, speak up. There is no judgement. There will be no ego or hurt feelings. No one is less. No one is more. We are all here to serve. I have a huge amount of respect and love for each and every one of you and I am beside myself with joy to have you all here together in my home. Speak freely. Pray freely. Laugh freely.

Please."

"Well said, Eric," Lev said softly. "And I feel prompted to ask Henrik a question. He smiled at Henrik. "Sir, did the Lord give you, by any chance, any messages to give us upon your arrival?"

Henrik laughed. "Oh wow, God is so good. I love when He plays little games with us. Even as I speak I feel like Jesus is smiling and laughing and nodding his head in merriment."

All the men turned quietly and waited for Henrik to explain. The women too, turned and waited.

Henrik nodded. "This morning, in the wee hours, before I awoke for my trip here, I had a dream. In the dream I was sitting on train and a man with a clip board approached. He looked like the one you would see collect a ticket, you know, blue jacket, blue tie, light blue shirt and a little blue hat, the conductor I suppose. He smiled at me and checked whatever was written on the clipboard. He said, 'Sir, I will give you the information, but you are not to disclose it until someone specifically asks you if the Lord has given you a message.' Then he turned his clipboard around so that I could read it. It said, 'When the babe cries, the prophetess will speak. An important journey is at hand. Take heed. Make haste. Little children will confirm.'"

He stopped and shrugged. "I can still see the words clearly in my head. So, I have no idea what that means, other than I know that we are going on a journey to help rid the world of darkness."

Eric glanced at Jeffy who seemed dazed or bewildered. She offered her father a slight smile and a shrug.

"Well then," Eric said. "That is quite cryptic. I'm very interested to see how this goes and what amazing things we are about to learn."

At that moment, Elijah's monitor sounded with a loud cry. Jeffy immediately stood. "Oh, sorry, that's Eli." She started out of the room but then stopped and turned. "Lives are at stake, but much more than that. This will be a trial run. Much force is needed. All must travel. The power of three generations, which is the three Erics. The power of friendship, which is the Lee brothers, Mr. Stewart, Mr. Appel and Jeff Davis. The power of brotherhood, which is Ricky, Mark, Joey, and then JoJo, Logan, young Eric and Gabe. Light is stronger than darkness. Stay faithful. Do not doubt."

She stopped and drew a deep breath. "I hope I didn't misspeak. I have to see about Eli." Turning quickly, she ran up the three steps that lead to the dining room, headed left to the back stairs and trotted up to her room.

Those in the living room sat stunned, except for Eric and Shelley.

Henrik eye's opened wide. "So, your daughter is a prophetess?"

Eric smiled. "Well, she would never call herself that. She is very close to God and hears from Him often and has never been wrong in what she says will happen or when she feels there is a disturbance in the force. She plays it down. But when Jeffy speaks, we all take heed."

Miguel smiled. "Oh, this just keeps getting better and better."

The rest of the men laughed and agreed.

As Jeffy headed up the back stairs, Melody and the five Kino children came down the front stairs, freshly energized from their naps. Whenever their father was home when they woke from their naps they would always run to him immediately, and today was no exception. Melody wasn't sure if she should stop them since there was company, but, she really had no choice because they were fast.

The adults all looked up as the five rambunctious children ran into the living room calling, "Daddy, Daddy!"

Eric and Shelley immediately stood.

Instead of stopping the ruckus, Eric knelt down and held his arms open wide. They all ran into them, some more victorious because they got there first and were the closest to him.

"Hello, little ones," he said calmly. "Did you actually sleep or did you give Melody a hard time?"

"We slept, we slept," they all answered.

"And Melody did too," Angelina said with glee.

Shelley looked up at Melody who's face turned pink. Melody shrugged. "I read them two stories, I sang them a song, and I guess somewhere in there I fell asleep. Sorry."

"No need to apologize," Shelley said. "These kiddos could wear anybody out. I just appreciate you so much, Melody. You've allowed me to be able to spend some time with our guests."

"And I appreciate that too," Eric said as he rose. "Okay, children, I want you to introduce yourselves to our new guest that just arrived. His name is Mr. Johansen. Can you say that?"

They tried to repeat it.

Eric nodded. "Well, that's a start. We'll work on it."

Henrik smiled. "The little ones on the street where I live call me Mr. Henry. That might be easier."

Eric nodded. "Is that easier, kiddos? Try saying Mr. Henry."

"Mr. Henry," they all said loudly.

Eric nodded. "Very well, you may call him that for now, but we will still work on it. Okay, do you remember how to introduce yourselves?"

"Yes sir," they said brightly.

Eric nodded and waited as they lined up in front of Henrik.

"Go Angel," Nate whispered loudly.

"I am, I was getting weady." She smiled brightly. "Hi, my name is Angewina Kino, but some people call me Angel."

"And I am Manny Kino."

"Hewwo, I'm Noah Kino."

"Hi, I'm Abwaham Kino."

"My name is Nathaniel Kino, but they call me Nate."

Abraham frowned. "Oh, I forgot to say they call me Abe."

Henrik laughed and leaned forward and shook each hand. "So, tell me, who's the

eldest?"

Manny smiled. "I am."

"Lovely. And who's next?"

"I am," Noah said.

"And then me," Angelina said.

"And then me," Abe said.

"I'm the youngest," Nate finally said.

"So, when you introduced yourselves, you almost went in order of your age, oldest to youngest, except Angelina went first."

They all nodded and Eric and Shelley smiled.

"Why?" Henrik asked, his eyes twinkling and very much looking forward to the answer.

"Nate," Eric said. "Can you tell Mr. Henry why Angelina went first?"

Nate nodded. "Yes sir. Angel went first because she's a girl, she's our sister, and we have to take care of the girls because we love them and protect them and we hold open doors for them, and we let them go first to show them we care about them, but they have to be careful to not get uh attitude, because they are s'posed to be kind and sweet and loving like Mommy is, and they are s'posed to have um, gratitude?" He stopped and looked at his father, who nodded his head. "Yeah, gratitude, for us guys taking care of them," he finished.

They all looked at Nate with wide eyes.

"You are a very smart young man, aren't you?" Henrik asked.

Eric smiled. "Nate, it seems, is much like our Jeffy in his IQ," he explained.

"Well, that is exciting! And Nate, that was a lovely explanation of why we take care of the girls. Well done."

Nate grinned.

"Mommy, can we have our snack?" Abe asked as he eyed the trays of goodies.

"Wait," Noah said. "We have to tell dem stuff."

"Oh yeah," Abe said.

"What do you have to tell us?" Eric asked.

Noah smiled. "You go first, Abe."

Abe nodded. "We will take care of all duh girls when you go bye bye."

"And," Noah said, "you have to hurry. Iwis is waiting."

"Iris?" Shelley asked.

The boys nodded.

Eric looked around the room at the bemused expression of the others. "And these two guys seem to be like Jeffy in her psychic connections," he explained.

"Children will confirm," Henrik said. "That's what the Lord meant. Amazing. This is just simply amazing."

The others in the room all nodded. They all felt a sudden pull, Jesus telling them to get their game faces on. All of this has large repercussions. It wasn't going to be easy, and they needed to be in business mode. As always, there is a possibility of failure, but that would cost lives of loved ones and they had to be at their best on the battlefield.

Mission accepted.

They all turned as the front door opened and Logan came in, his guitar in hand a smile on his face.

"Logan!" Melody exclaimed.

He smiled. "Hey baby. Surprise." He hugged her and gave her a quick kiss, and then headed into the living room.

"Hey everyone!"

"This is one of my grandsons," Eric said quickly to Sakchai, Andrew and Henrik. "Logan nice to see you son."

"Nice to see you, Granddad," he said brightly. "And all of you," he swept his gaze around the room. "Granddad, the rest of us are also coming over and I brought my guitar because I got the feeling that I needed to take you all to church, in a musical way."

Eric and the others smiled. "Logan, I'm proud of you. You, son, are in tune in so many ways."

Logan grinned.

✝✝✝

January 28th Tuesday Evening

En route to Kino Estate

Jason glanced over at his wife as he drove to the Kino Estate. "How ya doin' Angelface?"

Angel smiled. "I love when you call me that."

He chuckled. "I know. That's why I do it."

She smiled. "Ahh, Jason. Life is strange, isn't it? We've come a long way since the day I met you at Shelley's first tournament."

He nodded. "I should say so since you wouldn't give me the time of day at that point. You had your eyes on Grandmaster Kino."

She shrugged. "I mean, he was like a shining light. It was hard to see anyone else, but when I got close enough, I could see you standing there beside him." She smiled. "And you were so kind to me and so patient with me, even when I was acting a fool and pretty much ignored you."

Jason nodded. "Well, sweet Angel, I knew from the moment I met you that you were the one. I believed God led me to you, and so, if He did that, then I was willing to be patient and wait for you to see me, though I never told anyone that I felt that way except my brother."

Angel smiled. "And who knew you would be such a perfect man? Well, I mean, the perfect man for me. So strong. So confident. You knew exactly who you were. Your relationship with God was strong. You had big ideas and big goals and you knew just where you wanted to go with your security business. Mostly though, you seemed to understand my psyche, my emotional trials, and my needs."

"What I understood was that you were all alone in the world except for a few superficial friends. You were lost. But God knew exactly where you were, and sent me to you."

Angel nodded and looked over at her husband as he drove. "God sent you to me.

Oh how I love you, Jason Lee."

He smiled. "I love you, my Angelface. You have made my life so wonderful and so happy."

She sighed.

He frowned. "If you could have anything in the world, anything at all, what would you ask for?"

She shrugged. "I already have so much."

"That's nice that you're grateful for what you already have, but I mean, if there was something else, anything, what would you want?"

She thought for a minute. "Well," she said softly, "I was recently thinking how much I wish we'd had another child. I am so sorry, Jason, that I couldn't give you more children."

He smiled. "Well, babe, it wasn't for lack of trying," he said, trying to lighten her mood.

She giggled.

He got serious. "Angel, would you like to adopt a child?"

She looked at him, her eyes wide. "Would you? Have you been thinking along those lines?"

"It's crossed my mind a few times."

"Why haven't you brought it up?"

"I just did."

"I mean, well, I guess I mean, how long have you been thinking about adopting a child?"

"Off and on for a few years. But not really seriously until recently."

"Why now?" she asked.

"I heard what you said last night to Shelley. It made me wonder if you really wanted another child."

She looked closely at him. "Do you?"

"I asked you first."

She frowned. "Honestly— I would love to have another child, but I wouldn't want to have one if you were only doing it for my sake."

He smiled. "What if I told you that I would be ecstatic to have another child to raise? But only if you really and truly wanted to and not because you think I want to."

She felt tears well up in her eyes and blinked them back. "Jason, don't tease me. Would you really want to adopt a child?"

He smiled. "I really would."

"But do you have time to be a father again?"

He shrugged. "I have the company to where it practically runs itself, so I have more time now than I did when Kimmie was little. The question is, do you have enough time to take care of another child?"

"I'll make time. I'll hire another assistant director. I'll reorganize the foundation. I'll do whatever it takes."

Jason smiled. "So, this is real? Really? I mean, really Angel, are we seriously

gonna do this?"

She couldn't hold back the smile or the tears. "Oh, Jason, are we really gonna do this? Yes! Yes, let's do this."

Jason nodded. "Okay, well, let's take a little time, pray about it, and see if this is God's will, though I have a feeling it was Him who put the idea in our heads. Let's let it simmer for awhile and we can get the ball rolling."

Angel sniffed. "I didn't think I could be happier, and yet, here it is!"

Jason smiled. His thoughts turned to him having to go to Georgia for a few days. "I'm happy that you're happy. So, Angel, let me ask, what are your thoughts about this little trip I need to take to Georgia?"

She sighed. "I think it's scary. Evil is real. It takes lives. You and I know that first hand. Jeffy said, the power of friendship and named you and Justin personally and that tells me that God wants you to go. That tells me that your friendship with Eric is beautiful and powerful in the eyes of the Lord, and that power must be used for whatever purpose in Georgia. I don't really understand what exactly you can do, but I guess I need to let go of trying to understand everything."

Jason nodded. "That's right. Let go and trust God. He wouldn't have me go there for no reason. There must be something He needs of me and since Jeffy said 'the power of friendship,' I think that means that Justin and I need to support Eric in whatever he is called to do."

Angel nodded. "I just wish I knew what all was happening, because, Lord have mercy it's hard to not know what the man I love is gettin' his self into. I'm fixin' to go crazy."

He smiled at her southern idioms. "First, I didn't get myself into it. I'm just being obedient. Second, I'll try to keep you informed. So, take a deep breath, Angel, and have faith, baby and pray that it will be okay."

✝✝✝

January 29th 7:30 AM Wednesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Keegan headed upstairs to find his wife. She was sitting on the bed, changing Gentian's diaper and saying she was gonna get her tummy.

Gentian was smiling and cooing. Isaiah lay on his tummy near Gentian's head, his weight supported on his arms as he looked on.

Keegan smiled as he watched Lizzy play with the babies. What a beautiful sight. Both babies had a head full of hair, Gentian's was dark like Iris' and Gabe's, but surprisingly, Isaiah's was blond. The babies were strong, unvaccinated, un-poisoned, and being raised with Jeffy's protocols. They were alert and bright and almost always happy.

Lisa and Chaz Stewart were also raising their twins with Jeffy's protocols and they too, were so much more alert and healthy than most children their age. Both families used a doctor who was totally on board with Dr. Kino Wallace. Those doctors were becoming more and more common and it was a great thing to see.

Keegan moved forward and leaned over Lizzy's shoulder. "Well hello there

kiddos," he said softly, and chuckled as both babies' faces lit up and they began to smile and become excited at the appearance of their father.

Lizzy smiled. "They sure love their daddy."

Keegan smiled. "Their daddy sure loves them." He glanced at his wife. "And he sure loves their mommy."

Lizzy sighed contentedly.

"So, I came up to check on you."

"Sorry. Gentian was a little fussy this morning so I was taking some extra time with her."

"It's okay. The girls have eaten breakfast. Rose and Daisy have left for the center. Lily came down and ate and says she's feeling fine and she wanted to help Violet do the dishes and I peeked in on our little Iris when I came up here and she's still sleeping."

Lizzy nodded. "I need to go get her up. She was coughing again last night. I hope she isn't relapsing. I mean, she never really got all the way back to her energizer bunny self."

Keegan nodded.

Lizzy looked up at him. "Keegan, have you heard anything else from Gabe this morning?"

He smiled because he knew she'd ask. "Not yet, honey. It's only four something in the morning there. But I'm sure he's okay. They said he hit his head and was concussed. He vomited one time. They've assigned him to light duty, until next Monday. Doc says he's gonna be fine."

"Did Jeffy see to him?"

"No, they didn't see any need to call her in on it."

"Usually they don't have to call her in. She usually calls him."

Keegan nodded. "Yes, that's true, but she's pretty busy right now. Cam's mother came to visit and meet Eli and she's been tied up with that and also with members of the twelve arriving at the Kinos'. I'm sure if Gabe was bad off, she would be all over it."

Lizzy sighed. "And so, the twelve, they're all coming here this coming weekend to see if they can help with this problem, right? Whatever is trying to hurt Lily and whatever is haunting Iris, they're gonna make it stop, right?"

Keegan's lips pressed tightly together because he was feeling very unworthy that he hasn't been able to protect his daughters. He finally brought himself back to the question and nodded. "Well, ten are coming, and Thomas is here. That makes eleven. Yesterday Jeffy did her thing, and gave a message from the Lord. She said that the twelfth man will be provided. She also said that others were being called to join us. Gabe and his brothers and..."

"Gabe's coming home? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, I wasn't sure if he was gonna be allowed off training, but since he was injured, Jason texted me last night and let me know that he's coming home this weekend. He'll be here Friday evening."

"Oh wow, that is gonna make Iris so happy."

Keegan nodded.

"Well," Lizzy began as she rose from dressing Gentian. "Are you gonna be up here for a few minutes?"

"I can be. Why?"

"Will you watch the babies a few minutes while I go get Iris up and tell her about Gabe?"

He smiled. "Yes of course." He knelt down beside the bed and spoke to the babies. "Hey, kiddos. You're mom gets to tell Iris, so I get to tell you that your big brother is coming home. He's gonna be so happy to see you. Are you gonna be happy to see him?"

The babies gurgled and cooed.

Keegan chuckled. "I'll take that as a 'yes'."

Smiling, Lizzy headed for Iris' room. Iris was still sleeping. Lizzy sat down on the side of the bed. "Hey sweet girl. Are you gonna wake up sometime or are you gonna sleep all day?"

Iris groaned a little and stretched out her arms and legs like she always did when she was waking. She opened her eyes, smiled at her mom, closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

Lizzy smiled. "Iris, my little sleepyhead, let's get up and get dressed and go downstairs and have some yummy breakfast, okay?"

Iris sighed and opened her eyes. Lizzy scooped her up and pulled her into her lap. "Good morning, baby girl."

"Mornin'" Iris mumbled.

Lizzy smoothed her hair back out of her face and frowned and set Iris down on the bed. "I'll be right back." She hurried back to her bedroom.

Keegan was talking to and tickling the babies and he looked up. "Lizzy? What's wrong?"

Lizzy shook her head. "I want to take Iris' temp. She feels a little warm. I hope she's not relapsing."

She grabbed the thermometer from the basket on top of the twin's changing table/dresser and went back to Iris.

A minute later, Keegan stood in the doorway of Iris' bedroom. "What's the verdict, Doc?"

Lizzy sighed. "It's 101.4. That's not terrible, but I'm gonna keep a close eye on her today and if she gets worse, I might take her in to Doctor Regan."

Keegan nodded. "Okay, well, I really have to go into the office today. We're having a big consult with the GBI to sew up some loose ends after the big bust. Once that's done, we might have new work from the whole state of Georgia to help them catch some bad guys who were working with the operation up in Rome."

Lizzy sighed and nodded. "I understand. I can handle taking Iris to the doctor all by my self. I'm a big girl."

He frowned. "Well, Violet and Lily are here if you need anything. I'll go tell them to stick around in case you need them."

"Where's Heather?"

"She and Nolan are working with a contractor on their house remodel."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Well, it doesn't matter. When I met you, Keegan, I was handling five little ones all by myself. I can handle three of them today."

He started to remind her that she was now much older, but thought better of it. He smiled. "I know. It was such a turn on."

She offered a soft laugh.

"Still," he went on, "as soon as my meeting is over, I'll come straight home. Call me if you need anything."

"I will, I promise."

He bent down and kissed his wife and his daughter. "Iris, baby girl, you get better, okay?"

She raised her head. "Am I sick?"

He smiled. "Well, if you have to ask, I think maybe you're not."

Iris laid her head back down. "I not sick, I'm sleepy."

Keegan placed his hands on both his daughter's head and his wife's head and began to pray over them. When he finished, Lizzy smiled at him.

"Thank you," Keegan. "Have a good day."

"I love you," he answered and turned to go back to the bedroom. He'd placed the babies back in their cribs. Gentian was asleep and Isaiah was looking up at him with his big bluish/brown eyes. A circle of light brown surrounded a circle of blue. He smiled at the baby. "Well, Isaiah, Daddy has to go to work. You keep an eye on the ladies, okay?"

Isaiah answered with a soft coo, making Keegan chuckle. Turning, he donned his shoulder holster and firearm, slipped on his suit jacket, whispered a goodbye to the babies and took his leave.

Downstairs he stopped in the kitchen to let Lily and Violet know that Iris wasn't feeling well and their mother might need help. He started out to the garage and stopped. Looking back at two of his daughters, he frowned.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" Violet asked.

He sighed. "Nothing really. Just feel uneasy, I guess. You girls know I love you, right?"

"Of course," Lily said.

He looked at her. Her arm was in a cast. Her face seemed pale and slimmer, like she'd lost some weight. She still had a few scratches on her cheek and chin from where the glass hit her when the window exploded. She looked battle weary. He frowned. "Lily, don't go near that house today."

"I won't, though whatever bad things are in that house don't seem to need me to be nearby in order to hurt me."

He nodded. "You're right. Well, Grandmaster Kino and all his reinforcements are coming this weekend to help us take care of that problem. He said God is directing their coming here and that means that God is aware of what's happening and is taking care of it, so hold on, baby girl. God's got this."

She nodded.

He sighed. "And I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to vanquish the evil."

Lily frowned. “We all went over there, so apparently, all of us together are not strong enough. Apparently, this is a special kind of evil, and apparently it requires some special forces different than the Marine kind.”

Keegan smiled. “Apparently.”

“Daddy don’t be down on yourself.”

He nodded. “I’ll try. I don’t like feeling defenseless. Right now though, I gotta get to work. Love you girls. Watch out for your mom.”

“We will. Love you too, Daddy,” they said as they watched him go.

✝✝✝

January 29th 9:20 AM Wednesday Morning

UCLA Campus, Los Angeles, California

Agent Joon Kim watched as Jordan came out of Kaplan Hall after her English class. She did a good job of pretending to look around for her bodyguard. She was pretending, because she knew he was over near the car watching her from afar.

Several times over the past few days he’d spotted Mason Cole near Jordan. Agent Kim didn’t let on that he’d seen him. He wanted Cole to think that he was successfully stalking her. He told Jordan about it this morning, told her that he was gonna give the guy some space to see what he does. He wanted Jordan to play along and act like her bodyguard wasn’t nearby. He gave her an earpiece so he could talk to her and he’d handed her some pepper spray, just in case Cole came on strong. The spray would cover and give Kim the few seconds he’d need to get to her. If Cole approached her today, Agent Kim would swing into action in more ways than one, and pepper spray wasn’t part of his plan.

He’d already investigated the guy. He seemed to be a model student, a model guy, but a loner. He’d been enrolled in the school for four years. He’s a junior, studying computer science. His buying habits though, were suspicious to Kim. He purchased specialized wireless network analyzers and a Wi-Fi Pineapple, that is used for security testing and can intercept or manipulate Wi-Fi traffic. Those things might be things he’s learning about in class. Or they might lead to something much worse. In his investigation, Kim learned that Cole had hacked into the school mainframe more than once and that meant he knew a whole lot about Jordan. Where she lived, where her mother lived, who her siblings were and where they went to school. So many places that she was vulnerable.

Agent Kim had done all of this work on his own, but intended to share his findings with his cousin, Jason Lee, if today’s experiment proved he was not just being overly cautious. He watched as Jordan looked around and appeared to be frustrated that she couldn’t find him. She walked back and forth in front of the building, waiting for him, and finally wandered a little further around the walk that ran beside the building between the building and the street where he was parked. He could see her perfectly and so could the campus security cameras.

Finally, Cole made his move. Agent Kim watched Mason Cole start up a hill and follow the walkway around to the side of the building. Agent Kim spoke into his mic. “He’s coming up from your right rear. Don’t be startled, but appear to be startled.” He

videoed from his car and his earpiece picked up the conversation.

"Jordan! Jordan, wait," Cole called.

She stopped and looked back at him and shook her head. "I told you last time, Mason, that I don't want to talk to you anymore."

"Aww, come on. You can't blame a guy for trying."

"I can when I've told the guy 'no' many times. Mason, I'm engaged to be married. I am NOT available."

"Okay, okay, you're not available, I get it. But don't be mad, Jordan. At least let me make it up to you."

Kim's eyes narrowed.

Mason reached out and touched her hand. "Why don't you come with me and I'll buy you a coffee."

She pulled her hand away. "No thank you. I have to go."

Her voice shook and Kim knew that was all she could take. He got out of the car and started toward them, using cars and trees and shrubbery to stay hidden from Cole's view as long as possible.

"So, where's your little kung fu panda bodyguard?" Mason asked.

"I'm, uh, I don't know, but I'm sure he'll be here any second."

Mason looked around. "Guess he's like your fiancé."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"He claims ownership over you and doesn't take the job seriously."

Jordan's face turned red with anger.

"Ya see, Mason, that's why I don't like you. Your thinking is all twisted. First, no one has ownership over me. Now, please, stop this nonsense and go away. I don't want to talk to you anymore."

"You'll regret this," Mason said.

Her face paled. "That– sounds like a threat."

He smiled. "Oh, no, you misunderstand. I just mean that you'll regret giving me up for the spoiled little rich boy you think you're gonna marry."

"You're kidding yourself," Jordan stated flatly.

Mason frowned. "You think you're better than me?"

Jordan slipped her hand into her purse to grasp the pepper spray.

"Miss Brooks," Agent Kim said as he walked up from behind Mason.

Jordan's eyes teared in relief.

Agent Kim looked at Mason. "I thought I told you to never come near her again. If needs be I'll get restraining order."

Mason smiled. "Cute accent, little man. But no need to do all that. I really don't want anything to do with her anyway. She's a waste of time."

"And you are a waste of my time."

"Maybe you should take your job a little more seriously."

Agent Kim nodded. "You are absolutely right." He took Jordan by the arm. "Come on, Miss Brooks."

He escorted her to the car and opened the door for her and put her in, then went

around and got in. He looked over at her. “Are you alright?”

She drew a deep breath. “Yes. I mean, I think so. But I’m really glad you came up when you did.” Her voice broke as she got out the last word.

He patted her hand. “I know. But Miss Brooks, you did great. It’s okay. Really, you’re okay. He’s a pretty creepy guy and we now know what I wanted to know. Take a deep breath.”

She did as ordered and watched as he pulled out his phone.

He smiled. “I want to call Jason, but I just realized, I need to go through the proper channels so no one thinks I’m getting special treatment. I need to call Chief Davis real quick. Is that okay with you?”

“Of course.”

“Hand me your phone.”

Her brow furrowed.

He smiled. “Trust me.”

She handed him the phone. He turned it off and removed the battery.

“Why’d you do that?”

“You’ll see.”

She nodded and he hit a button on the dashboard.

“Yes, sir, Agent Kim,” a woman said.

“Is Chief Davis available?”

“Yes, sir, hold one moment.”

“Davis,” Jeff said quickly.

“Sir, I think we have a situation.”

Agent Kim went on to explain the investigatory work he’d done on Mason Cole and that the guy was actually stalking Jordan.

“So, sir, he took off, but I’m sure he’s gone to watch Jordan’s apartment building. I’ve seen him there the last few times I’ve dropped her off. Sir, I’d like to follow him. I think this guy is not just some harmless guy who can’t get a date. He’s got issues.”

“I think I agree with you, Agent Kim. Nice work. Take her home as you always do. I’ll have an agent watch the apartment. You follow Cole and be very careful. Don’t want to be surprised by a bad guy with a plan.”

“Yes sir.”

“Is Jordan in the car?”

“Yes sir.”

“Jordan?”

“Yes, Mr. Davis.”

“How ya doin’ sweetie?”

“I’m okay. Maybe a little bit shaken up.”

“I understand. Listen, I’m gonna have an agent head over there. Don’t know who yet. Stay inside and keep the door locked until I call you and let you know when he’s there.”

“Okay, but I was supposed to go to practice at three.”

“He’ll be there in about thirty minutes.”

"Oh, okay."

"And Jordan, don't talk about what's happening to your roommates or to young Eric on the phone. If this Mason Cole is into computer hacking and such, he could be monitoring your phone or computer and we don't want him to know that you're onto him."

"But can he hear *this* conversation?"

"I disabled her phone before I called you sir," Agent Kim interjected.

"Good job, Agent Kim. So no, Jordan," Jeff said, "he can't hear this conversation. We're talking on a secure encrypted Ameritech line."

"Oh, yeah, I should've known that," Jordan said softly.

"Okay, Agent Kim, keep me informed personally."

"Yes sir. And Chief Davis, if my tail today doesn't give us anything, I'd like permission to keep it up for a week or so, and also, bug his apartment."

"Permission granted. Take care of it."

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

"Thank you for a job well done."

✝✝✝

January 29th 12:30 PM Wednesday Afternoon
Ameritech Offices, Calvary, Georgia

Keegan pulled his phone from his inside breast pocket as he walked out of the building. He glanced at the readout as he answered. "Hey, sweetheart. I was just on my way out to head home. How's Iris?"

Lizzy sighed. "Well, that's what I'm calling about. She's not doing too good. She's very lethargic and sleepy. She says her head hurts and her temp is rising."

"What is it?"

"Well, it's only gone up a little since this morning. It's now 101.7 but the point is, I gave her some of Jeffy's fever reducer and it's still going up. I called the doctor, and he wants to see her right away."

"Okay, babe, then I'll meet you there."

"Thank you. I'm leaving the babies with Violet and Lily. There is plenty of milk in the fridge for at least three feedings. And Daisy said she'd be home soon and Heather and Nolan just came in the door, so they'll all be able to handle things here for awhile."

"Sounds like you got it covered."

"Hope I do, but Keegan, Iris is so pitiful. It worries me."

"Okay, take a deep breath and think positive thoughts and pray with the kids before you leave the house."

"I will. See you soon."

"Drive safely, Lizzy."

"You too."

✝✝✝

January 29th 1:30 PM Wednesday Afternoon
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lily, Justice, Violet, Heather and Nolan sat around the kitchen talking as Violet

and Heather fed their infant siblings with bottles.

Nolan looked on with pleasure. “Just think, Heather, one day soon you might be feeding our own little guy.”

“Well, if so, I wouldn’t be feeding him a bottle.”

“Um, so, is there something you two wanna tell us?” Violet asked.

Heather’s eyes opened wide. “Oh! Oh, no, absolutely not. We’re just dreaming of the future, that’s all.”

“I mean, he did say someday soon,” Justice said.

“Yeah, and you did call it a guy,” Lily added.

Nolan laughed. “I called it a guy because right now Heather happens to be feeding a guy.”

Heather nodded. “And I don’t know why he said ‘soon’. We won’t even be married for six more months and even if we got pregnant right away, that’s still fifteen months away.”

Nolan shrugged. “Perspective.”

Lily raised her eyebrows. “So, are you guys thinking that you’ll try for a baby right away?”

Heather and Nolan both smiled. “Well,” Heather began, “we’re not exactly going to try to get pregnant. We might try to time things so that I don’t get pregnant right away so that we’ll have time to finish the house and get the ranch started. “But, well, we’ll pretty much let the Lord bless us when He wants to bless us.”

Violet smiled. “Oh just think, Lily, of us being aunts. Aunt Vi— I think I like the sound of that.”

Lily nodded. “And we’ll fight over who gets to hold her.” She sighed. “So, last night, Dad said we should build a bunch of cabins out behind the house in the pasture and have them all open up onto the same big yard and we’ll have ball games and barbeques all together for holidays.”

“Oh, that sounds like so much fun,” Violet said.

“It does sound like fun,” Justice said softly, glancing at Lily, who blushed under his gaze.

Violet smiled. Heather smiled. Nolan smiled. The moment ended when Heather’s phone buzzed. She nodded at Nolan. “Babe, will you answer that for me. I kinda got my hands full of sweetness right now.”

Nolan picked up the phone and answered. “Hey, Mrs. Tanner. This is Nolan. Heather’s feeding Isaiah.”

“Okay, Nolan, can you put me on speaker?”

“You’re on speaker, ma’am.”

“Heather?”

“Yes Mom, what’s wrong?”

“Your father and I and Iris are on the way to the hospital.”

“Why? What happened?”

“The doctor believes Iris might have acute meningitis.”

“Oh, mom, that’s bad, right?”

"Yes, girls, it's very bad. Doctor Regan wants her in the hospital to get antibiotics intravenously."

"You said he thinks she has it. When will he know?"

"They won't know exactly for awhile. At the hospital they want to do a lumbar puncture and we'll also know more when the culture results come back. But acting fast is key right now, so they'll put her on a broad spectrum antibiotic at first until they know for sure what we're dealing with."

"Mom, this sounds serious," Lily said.

Lizzy sniffed as her emotions got the best of her for a few seconds. "It's very serious Lily, so I would like you guys to contact Jodi and Lisa and get them to start a prayer chain."

"Okay, we will," Heather said. "What about Gabe's prayer warriors?"

"I don't want to worry Gabe while he's out there if I don't have to. Let's wait until we get some preliminary results back and then we'll call him."

"Okay," Violet said.

"Are the babies doing okay?" Lizzy asked, her voice again emotional.

"Don't worry about the babies, Mom," Heather said. "They are taking their bottles like champs. We'll take good care of them."

"Thank you, girls. I'm gonna need one of you to get my pump and supplies and bring it up to the hospital for me, please."

"Got it. I'll be there soon," Heather said. "Is Dad still with you?"

"Yes, he's driving behind me. He has Iris with him. We'll be pulling into the hospital in about five minutes."

"Okay, Mom, don't worry," Heather said. "It's all gonna be okay. And tell Dad that Nolan and Justice are here and we're all okay."

"I will. Thank you, sweetie. Talk to you when I know more."

"Okay. Bye Mom. We love you," Lily called out.

"I love you too, baby girl."

Nolan ended the call and they sat there for a few moments, stunned.

Violet broke the silence. "Well, I'm gonna call Rose and Daisy." She stood and handed Gentian off to Justice. Will you hold her for a minute and let her finish her bottle?"

Heather nodded. "Yes, we all need to be together. Pray together." She stood. "Nolan, hold Isaiah, please. He needs burping. I'm gonna go find the breast pump for mom."

"My sweet Iris," Lily murmured. "Oh my goodness, I want to go see her and hug her and pray over her."

"I didn't even ask if they'll let us in to see her," Heather said.

"When Mom calls back with more information let's remember to ask."

✝✝✝

James 5:14-15

"Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in

faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven."

Chapter Twenty-Six

January 29th 12:10 PM PST Wednesday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace finished examining Alo Quinn and gave him a sweet smile. "Mr. Quinn, you are already getting much stronger. You're gaining muscle in your legs and your energy has rebounded significantly."

Alo and Dani both smiled. "I feel like a new man," he said. "I hardly feel like an eighty-three year old man."

"Cool, because you don't look like one or act like one," Jeffy returned. "Though, what does an eighty something year old man look and act like?"

"Well, before, he almost never asked me to trim up his hair, or what clothes he should put on," Dani said. "So, that's new and different!"

Jeffy nodded. "It's like he's taking care of the gift... which is his body, because it really is a temple."

Alo frowned. "Enough about me. Let's go back out and join the others. I don't like missing a minute with that group."

Jeffy and Dani smiled. "We agree."

They walked out to join the rest. The men who were fasting were sitting out on the deck. Jeffy glanced around. Her dad and mom and Melody were busy serving lunch to the children at the kitchen table. Jeffy smiled at the beautiful children. Cam was home today and he was also sitting at the kitchen table with his mother. He had Eli standing on his thighs and bouncing his legs up and down and Anna was laughing.

Jeffy's phone buzzed and she quickly pulled it out and looked at it. Cam looked at her questioningly. "It's Lizzy Tanner," she said and turned slightly away to take the call.

"Hello, Mrs. Tanner," Jeffy said brightly, but frowned when she heard a sniff.

"Jeffy, Dr. Kino, I, we need your help, please."

"Of course, tell me what's goin' on?" Jeffy said, turning back to glance at Cam and nodding him over.

Cam immediately handed Eli off to his mother and hurried over to listen in on Jeffy's phone call.

"It's Iris," Lizzy began. "I thought she was just relapsing, with her URI, but her fever spiked so I took her into to see Dr. Regan. He took some cultures and had us take her straight to the hospital. He thought she..."

"Meningitis," Jeffy said softly.

"Yes. So, we got here and they did a lumbar puncture and the fluid was purulent and slightly green in color. They put her on antibiotics but they feel like it's progressing too quickly. They want to life-flight her to the *Children's Hospital* up in Atlanta. Jeffy, they're saying she might not make it," Lizzy said as she burst into tears and then

stopped immediately. “I’m sorry, I’m trying to hold it together.”

“Is Mr. Tanner there with you?”

She sniffed. “Yes, he’s right here. They’re prepping her to put her on the flight and he’s holding her hand right now.”

“Okay. What’s the attending docs name?”

“It’s Doctor Walsh Brown.”

“Mrs. Tanner, tell him I’m gonna call him right now. I’m gonna hang up with you and then call him in just a minute, and then I’ll call you right back.”

“Okay, thank you, Jeffy.”

“Hang in there,” she said quickly. “Cam get me the personal number of Dr. Walsh Brown at Pine Forest General.”

He nodded and pulled out his phone.

Jeffy turned to her mother. “Mom, we have a medical emergency. Iris Tanner has a preliminary diagnosis of acute meningitis and they’re telling Mrs. Tanner that she may not make it. We need prayers. Big time. I’m gonna be on the phone with the Doc and then I’ll give more details soon.”

Shelley nodded, her eyes immediately tearing at the thought of beautiful, sweet little Iris Tanner fighting for her life.

Cam thanked the girl at Ameritech and texted the number to Jeffy.

She immediately placed the call. The doctor picked up on the first ring. “This is Dr. Brown.”

“Dr. Brown, this Dr. Kino Wallace.”

“Yes, Dr. Wallace, it’s a pleasure and honor to speak to you. Unfortunately the reason is not a pleasure.”

Jeffy dispensed with the pleasantries and started asking questions. She got all the information she needed including lab results. Then, she closed her eyes and tried to read first, Elizabeth Tanner, and then Keegan Tanner. They both were completely in distress and trying to trust God. Finally, she went to Iris. She was difficult to find and touch because she was still under the influence of the anesthesia from the spinal tap, but Jeffy didn’t need her to be awake. She searched her body but couldn’t get a clear read. Maybe it was because Jeffy herself was too distressed. Sighing, she knew her next move.

First, she called Lizzy back.

“Hello?” Lizzy answered immediately. “Did you talk to Dr. Brown?”

“Yes, I did. Listen, it sounds bad, but things aren’t always as they seem. I’m on my way. I’ll be there in about five hours. I can’t get a good read on Iris, but I might be able to as I get closer and as she comes out from under the anesthesia. So, it’ll be about 8:00 PM your time when I arrive.”

Lizzy sniffed. “Okay. I need to call Gabe, he needs to come home. Oh, Jeffy, if Iris di..., um, if she doesn’t make it, Gabe may not ever get over it.”

Jeffy’s eyes filled. “I understand, but let’s not go there, and don’t underestimate Gabe. He’s strong. And you know what? Don’t call Gabe. We’ll send someone to tell him in person and bring him home.”

“Thank you,” Lizzy whispered.

"Mrs. Tanner, it's not hopeless. Don't give up. Stay strong."

Jeffy ended the call. Turning she headed through the kitchen and out to the deck, motioning at Cam and the ladies to follow her. Melody didn't want to leave the children so she stood in the open glass door to listen.

The men all looked up from their discussion of how they would handle things in Pine Forest. Eric's eyes met Jeffy's. "Jeffy? What's happened?"

She drew a breath. "It's Iris. It's bad and we have to act quickly. You can't wait until this weekend. You have to leave today. As soon as possible. Within the hour if you can."

"Can you fill us in?"

"Yes." She stopped to get her emotions under control. "Iris Tanner has been diagnosed with acute bacterial meningitis. It came on within only a few hours. She's being life-flighted to *Children's* in Atlanta. The doctor at the hospital where they took her first gave me all the lab work and information. He says it's possible she may not make it. He told me she may not make it even through the night."

"Do you agree with his prognosis?"

"I can't tell. I have to get closer to her. For some reason I can't really read her. She's still under the affect of the anesthesia, but that shouldn't stop me, so, I'm not sure what's going on. But just intuitively, I feel like the demons you guys are going to battle are part of this illness. Or all of it. But we have to leave right away. Right away. Grab your bags everyone. Call Jason. Daddy, sweet little Iris, oh please, Dear Lord, do not let them take her. Please Jesus."

Eric nodded. "Okay, sweetie, we'll move fast. You and Cam go and get ready what you need." He looked around at the nine men. "Men? How much time do you think you might need?"

"Two minutes," Lev said.

The rest all agreed.

"Shelley, I need you to get hold of all the others who were supposed to travel this weekend. Ricky, Mark, Joey, and their boys. I'll get Justin, Jason and Jeff and of course, Gabe."

"Ugh," Jeffy said. "This is gonna be so hard on him. Don't tell Gabe on the phone. Maybe Jason could go in person and get him."

Eric nodded. "I think that's a good idea." He turned and called Jason.

"Eric, how can I help you?" he asked cheerfully.

Eric quickly explained the situation.

"Got it. I'll call the pilots. They'll be ready to leave by the time you get to the air strip. And I'll go collect Gabe. He and I and whomever takes a little longer to get there will take the second jet out. We'll be right behind you. Angel will start a prayer chain. And once Gabe is in the clear, Taylor can start a prayer chain on Gabe's website."

"Thank you, Jason."

"God go with us all, in Jesus' name," Jason replied.

"Amen, brother. Amen."

✝✝✝

January 29th 3:30 PM Wednesday Afternoon
Keegan Tanner → Home

Heather snatched up the phone when it finally rang. "Daddy?"

Everyone rose and gathered around Heather.

"Yeah, baby, it's me. Where are the girls? Did Violet make it back yet?"

"Yes, Dad, of course, it's been almost two hours since she took the pump up to you."

Keegan sighed. "Sorry. Guess I lost track of time."

"Okay, so we're all right here," Heather said.

"Are the guys still there?"

"Yes, sir," Nolan said quickly. Jericho, Justice, CJ just arrived and myself."

"And the babies are okay?"

"Yes, they're fine."

"Okay, so, girls, you know, we've talked about this before and it applies to our situation. When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace, God was there with them to help them. But He didn't help them by getting rid of the fiery furnace, right? You understand that. Still, He was in there with them and he brought them through. Right?"

"Daddy, stop stalling. Why are you stalling?" Heather said.

"He's not stalling," Rose said quietly. "He's getting all his ducks in a row and getting us prepared because whatever it is he has to say is bad, am I right, Dad?"

Keegan sighed. "As usual," he muttered. "Okay, listen." He stopped to get himself under control. He needed to be strong for his family. If *he* fell apart, how hopeless would *they* feel. "So, your sister is a very sick little girl. She has acute bacterial meningitis, which is a very serious disease, but if they get antibiotics administered fast enough, she has a better chance."

"And they did, right?" Daisy asked. "They got her on them right away."

"Yes, but when they did the lumbar puncture, the spinal fluid was already thick with pus and slightly green. They put her on antibiotics and also some kind of cortisol steroid that reduces inflammation and swelling of the brain."

"Remember Mrs. Aker, my third grade teacher? Her little boy died of meningitis," Rose said. "It's a very dangerous disease."

"Right, Rose," Keegan said. "It's an infection that attacks the membranes of the brain. It can be viral or bacterial and Iris' is bacterial."

"Which is much more dangerous," Heather whispered softly.

"Correct, Heather," Keegan said.

"Is she awake?" Violet suddenly asked. "Can we come to see her?"

He sighed. "She wasn't awake the last time I saw her. I don't know if she's awake now. Your mother is with her and..."

"Where are you Dad?" Rose asked. "Iit sounds like you're on your car phone."

"I am. Okay, now, listen. Iris is seriously ill. She's being life-flighted up to the *Children's Hospital* up in Atlanta."

"Life-flighted?" Lily said, her voice filled with fear and anxiety.

"Yes. They only let one parent go on the chopper, and your mom is with her. I'm currently driving up to Atlanta. Girls, I think you need to come up here. Leave the babies with Jodi or Lisa. Guys, I'm depending on you to get them up here safely. And maybe one of you guys could take the milk Lizzy has pumped back down to whomever is taking care of the babies."

"Yes, of course," the guys all said at once.

Keegan drew a deep breath. "Girls, here's the thing. I feel like I should just be honest and straight forward. The doctor's prognosis was not good. He's saying — he's saying that Iris may not make it."

"No," Violet cried as CJ quickly put his arm around her.

Lily sank to her knees in shock and Justice knelt down beside her.

Rose choked back her tears, and put a fierce expression on her face. Jericho knew that fierce expression was a cover and he reached down and took her hand and squeezed it.

Heather let the tears fall as Nolan placed his hands on her shoulders and squeezed softly.

Daisy shook her head in denial. "That can't be. This can't be happening, Daddy. Please."

"I understand how you're feeling," Keegan said softly. "I totally understand, still, we have to face this head on, baby girls. Your mom called Jeffy, and she's on the way and will be here by about eight tonight. She said she tried to read Iris but she couldn't get a clear reading and she feels that might be because the demons from the Sawyer home are blocking her, so she couldn't give us any other information, but she's on her way."

"Well, she can work a miracle," Daisy said. "I know she can. We all know. We've seen it with our own eyes."

"Yes we have, but the thing is, we don't know God's plan for our sweet little Iris." He stopped talking because his voice became clogged with emotion. He cleared his throat and went on. "We don't know, but we can certainly pray and ask that God will use Jeffy to heal our baby. If it's God's will, then she will be healed."

"What about Gabe?" Rose asked. "He needs to come home. Iris always wants him. Does he know?"

"He's coming," Keegan affirmed. "He should be here the same time as Jeffy, or shortly thereafter."

"So he knows all this?" Lily asked.

"Well, Jason is going to tell him in person, if he hasn't already. He'll tell him and take him to the airport and come with him. They're all coming. All the men. Lees, Kinos, Adams, Jeff Davis, and also the ten men who are part of the twelve. They're all coming to help one way or another. So stay in prayer. We've seen too many miracles to deny and maybe, just maybe, God won't take Iris from us."

They all nodded in agreement, but for some reason, they didn't feel very hopeful. It was almost as if they knew, this was gonna go down differently.

✝✝✝

January 29th 12:38 PM Wednesday Afternoon

Ameritech Training Center, Lake Ridge Canyon, California

The men of Ameritech's Red team trudged back into the dorm room one or two at a time after lunch. Gabe was already hard at work on his laptop, trying to complete a school assignment before they headed to a video session that will focus on real-life hostage situations, their outcomes, their mistakes, and how to improve.

"Tryin' to get a head start, Tanner?" Blade asked.

Gabe smiled. "Tryin' to catch up. I have an assignment due."

"Well, don't forget we have hostage training at 1:30."

"I won't forget. When suddenly I look up and no one is here, I'll figure it out."

"And by then you'll be late."

Gabe smiled. "So, two hundred pushups, no problem."

Agent Hall heard that and chuckled. "Ya better watch what you say, Tanner or it'll be three hundred next time."

Gabe nodded with a smile.

"No it won't Agent Dyal said. "Because he's on light duty and he knows they'll let it slide."

Gabe frowned. "Have they ever let anything slide?"

The guys got silent, making Gabe smile.

The dorm door opened abruptly and there was a gasp and one of the guys yelled, "Attention!"

The sound of urgency in the voice made them all turn quickly. They immediately scrambled off their beds, or left off in the middle of getting dressed and came to attention at the end of their beds at the sight of Commander Edwards accompanied by Chief Lee.

The two men entered the room and Chief Lee looked around. "Agents, sorry to interrupt your day, but I have urgent business." His eyes moved down the row to settle on the last bed. "Agent Tanner."

Eyes wide, Gabe nodded. "Yes sir, Chief Lee."

Jason sighed. "Gabe, I have some news about your family. Would you like to speak personally?"

Gabe swallowed hard. "Speak, Chief Lee. These guys are like family."

Jason nodded. "Very well. Gabe, your sister Iris is very ill and I am here to collect you and bring you home immediately."

Gabe's eyes opened wide. "Very ill, sir? What is wrong with her?"

Jason sighed. "She has acute bacterial meningitis. It's a very serious disease that attacks the brain."

"And they want me home?"

"Yes."

"Then, that means, she's not gonna get well?" Gabe asked, his voice catching on the emotions that rose. "Be honest, Chief Lee. How bad is this?"

"Gabe, they don't expect her to make it through the night."

Gabe fell to his knees in anguish. "Iris, baby girl," he murmured. "Oh, please God,

don't take my little flower girl." He did not try to stop the tears that welled and ran down his face.

"Gabe, we have to hurry."

The other agents stood stunned as Gabe stood, turned and grabbed his duffel and began stuffing random things into it. Gabe then grabbed his phone and wallet and laptop and nodded at Jason.

"Gabe," Agent Blade said. "What can we do for you?"

Gabe stopped and looked around. "Pray for Iris. She's the one you spoke to last week. Little Iris. Pray for her, please," he said, his voice clogged with sadness and emotion.

"We will," Agent Hall said softly.

"Chin up, Gabe," Agent Dyal called out as he passed.

"Hang in there, Tanner," Agent Cader said.

"We gotcha, Gabe," Agent Black declared.

Agent Moore reached out and patted Gabe's shoulder as he passed.

Agents Black, Jones, Holder, Fletcher and Walsh did the same, all murmuring words of encouragement and promises of prayers.

Gabe watched Jason Lee's back as they walked out of the building. "Chief Lee?" Gabe suddenly said.

Jason turned. "Yeah, son, whatcha need?"

"Does Jeffy, I mean, Dr. Wallace, has she been told?"

"Jeffy is already in the air on the way to see her."

"What does she say?"

"She says she's having a hard time reading her and she feels like the dark forces that are in that house, I mean, the old Sawyer place, they are blocking her."

Gabe thought about that. "If they're blocking her, then they want Iris to die. And that means we have to defeat them."

Jason nodded as he unlocked the doors to his vehicle. "That sounds logical to me and it happens to be exactly what Jeffy says we need to do. That's why we're all going to Pine Forest."

"All? All who?"

"Justin and I, Joey, Jeff, Mark, Logan, JoJo, young Eric, Ricky, Grandmaster Kino, Reverend Clark, Alo Quinn, Billy Wallace, Ces Iman, Sakchai Chen, Andrew Musani, Lev Vasilyev, Miguel Alvarez, and Henrik Johansen. And of course, Jeffy, Cam, and Eli."

Gabe nodded silently and thought about that as they drove. "I didn't get to meet them all."

"You will."

"So there will be eleven of the twelve. That's good. That's a lot of power. Wish we had all of them."

"Well, Jeffy said that the Lord says the twelfth man will be provided when they get to Georgia."

Gabe nodded again. "That's cool. That's good. Mr. Lee do you know if Iris is like,

awake, or unconscious or in a coma or what?"

"I heard she is not conscious."

Gabe sighed and sniffed. "Well, at least she's not crying for me."

"At least there's that." Jason glanced at him as he drove. The look of controlled pain on his young face, it broke Jason's heart.

Gabe looked up. "My parents, they must be suffering so hard. And my sisters. And the babies, they won't have the pleasure of getting to know Iris and the closeness of growing up with her." He let a soft sob escape and then choked it back. "Mr. Lee, have you spoken to my father?"

Jason shook his head. "I haven't had time. I had to do a lot of rearranging of some schedules and agents. Someone has to run things while we're all gone. Several people have had to step up. And of course, Myself, Joey and Jeff will make ourselves reachable."

Gabe nodded but didn't say anything.

Jason sighed. "I know you're hurting, Gabe. I know this is hard. Tell me what you're thinking."

Gabe sniffed again and drew a deep breath. "I'm not sure what I'm thinking. My mind is all over the place. I mean, of course there is the immediate, why? Why would God take the sweetest most beautiful light in this world? The world needs her. And then I think, who am I to second-guess God's plan? I will accept His will, and maybe God only wants us to turn to Him. But what if He really is gonna take Iris. I mean, I've been with Jesus, I know the peace and love I felt. Iris would be good in the arms of Jesus. She won't be sad or scared. She'll be happy. She'll be fine. So, I just need to trust God. And then I go back to 'please God, don't take Iris from our family. We need her. We love her so much. She is so special.' But whatever God does, I need to trust Him and pick up my cross and bear it, and oh, what a heavy cross this is. But I know God is with us and I wonder if He will answer my prayers, grant my desire, which is for Iris to live. She's like, love and cuteness and beauty and sweetness and a bright, bright light, all mixed together. I don't want her to suffer, and I'll accept God's will, but oh, how hard this is gonna be. And I'm thinkin, like, is there still any hope? And my mom and dad must be crushed. My sisters too. And what can I do for them to help them? What can I say to bring them comfort?"

Jason nodded. "Now you're getting somewhere."

Gabe looked at the man, their eyes met and Gabe nodded. "I guess I need to pray and ask God what I can do for my family. What can I do to ease their burden and their pain?"

"Now those words, Gabe, those are the words of a man."

Gabe sniffed. "I don't feel much like a man. I feel like curling up in a ball and crying my eyes out."

"Noted."

Gabe glanced up at Jason Lee, who was an extraordinary man, who'd created an extraordinary multi-billion dollar company and gave all the credit to God and Grandmaster Kino. Gabe knew that Grandmaster Kino had taught Jason since he was

only five years old. In a way, Grandmaster Kino had helped to raise him. No wonder Jason Lee was such a remarkable man.

Gabe sighed and nodded his head. Jason didn't have to say anything else. His one spoken word, 'noted,' validated Gabe's feelings and helped him to get them under control. "Mr. Lee, what time will we get to Atlanta?"

"It will be about 8:00 PM when we get in. Maybe a little later. We'll see. We will get you straight to the *Children's Hospital* in Atlanta. That's where Iris was life-flighted."

Gabe hadn't known that and the information made him see that the situation was even more grave than he'd thought. Well, he had a good four hours to pray. Iris needed prayer. Lots of prayers. Then he remembered something. "Mr. Lee, do you mind if I go live for a minute?"

"Of course not. Do what you need to do."

Gabe took out his phone and went live on his website. "Hey everyone," he said in a very serious tone. He sniffed and cleared his throat to get control. "Gabe Tanner here. I have an important request of you all. I'll wait a second to let some more people get on here." He watched, and as usual, the numbers began to grow. Finally he went on. "So, I am currently in desperate need of your prayers." His voice broke and he had to get control again. "Sorry. Do you all remember a few weeks before Christmas, I shared my little sister Iris' birthday celebration with you? She was turning three. Well, my sweet baby sister is right now in the *Children's Hospital* in Atlanta fighting for her life." He stopped for a minute as the tears try to come again. Choking them back, he went on to explain everything that he knew so far.

He told them he was on the way to the airport to fly home and see her before she succumbs. He told them he'd just learned of all of this and didn't know much more, and only knew he could turn to the Prayer Warriors.

"And I haven't even been able to speak with Taylor yet about all this so, Tay, if you're listening, hello and I'm about to call you."

Gabe glanced down to read a few of the comments. "You guys, thank you so much," he said, the emotion present in his voice. He sniffed back some tears. "I love you all. And yes, I'll get a Zoom prayer going once I get to the hospital. I'll get back to you with all the details as soon as I know them. Until then, God be with us all, in Jesus name. Amen."

He signed off.

✝✝✝

January 29th 3:50 PM Wednesday Late Afternoon
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

The only ones left at the Tanner home were Rose and Jericho and Lily and Justice. Heather and Violet had gathered things for the twins when Jodi, John and Hannah had arrived to take them. The Appels also prayed together with them, gave them words of love and encouragement and left with the Tanners' youngest members. Then Heather and Nolan got Daisy to ride with them and they'd taken off and shortly after, them, Violet and CJ headed up to Atlanta.

Rose came hurriedly down the stairs with some things for Lily. “Here’s your sweater, Lil.”

Lily looked up at her sister, her eyes filled with pain.

“Hey, sweetie,” Rose said, putting her arm around her. “I know. I know.” She hugged her.

“Rose, are you ready?” Jericho asked softly.

She looked around anxiously. “I think so.”

“Lily, are you ready?” Justice asked.

She drew a deep breath.

“Lily? Are you ready to go?” he asked again.

She looked up at him, her eyes blank.

“Lily? What’s wrong?”

Rose and Jericho looked at her. Her face was pale. Her hands were shaking. She seemed confused.

“Lily?” Jericho said loudly.

She looked at Justice. “I, uh, I don’t feel very good.”

“Tell me what’s happening,” Jericho said.

“I’m nauseated and I have a headache.” She raised her hand to her head. “Y’all go ahead. I’m gonna grab some, um, some, you know.”

Rose looked at Jericho. “What’s goin’ on?”

Lily leaned against Justice. “We need to go.”

Justice looked at Jericho. “Do you think she’s okay?”

Jericho frowned. “Lily, look at me.”

She blinked up at him, trying to focus on his face, and then went limp.

Justice caught her and picked her up into his arms and went to lay her on the living room sofa.

“Rose, will you grab my medical bag from the truck,” Jericho said quickly as he leaned over Lily.

Rose ran out the front door immediately.

Jericho used his thumb and forefinger to open her eyes. “Pupils are dilated. Lily?” he said as he took her pulse.

She opened her eyes. “Wuzz happening?” she asked, her words slurred.

Jericho drew a deep breath. “Lily, look right here at my nose.”

“What is it?” Justice asked.

Rose came in with his bag and set it down. He immediately took her blood pressure and her temperature.

Lily moaned. “Ugh, my head,” she cried.

“What is it?” Justice asked again.

Jericho shook his head. “The symptoms can mean a stroke or an aneurysm, there’s a lot of things that can produce these symptoms. Slurred speech, pupils dilated, blood pressure is high. Let me make a call and then we’ll talk.” He pulled out his phone.

“Max, I have a medical emergency over here at the Tanner home.”

“Another one?”

"Yes. It's Lily. Send paramedics and transport." He ended the call.

"Transport?" Rose asked.

"I'm sorry, Rose, but this is serious." He stood with his phone. "I have to talk to the ER doc."

Rose nodded and leaned over her sister. "Lily? Can you hear me?"

Lily blinked and looked up. "Who are you?"

Rose's eyes opened wide. "It's me, baby girl. It's Rose. You're scaring me. Lily, can you not see me?"

"Not very clearly. I don't understand what's happening. Where's Justice? I need him."

"I'm right here, sweetheart. Right here. I won't leave your side. I promise. I'm right here."

Lily blinked and tears ran over the side of her face.

Jericho ended his call and turned to work on Lily again. He took her blood pressure again, listened to her heart, shone light in her eyes, got her to squeeze his fingers and looked increasingly worried.

"Lily," Jericho said. "Can you see me?"

She sighed. "Yes, but you're blurry."

"Okay, sweetie. Listen, the paramedics are coming and they're gonna take you to the hospital and the doctor is gonna take good care of you."

Lily whimpered. "Justice?"

"I'm right here, baby."

"Rose?" Lily said softly.

"I'm here."

"Rose, go see Iris," Lily said, the sobs welling up as she spoke her little sister's name. "Go see her and tell her I love her. Tell her I'm sorry I can't come right now."

"I think maybe I'd better stay with you," Rose said softly.

Lily shook her head and then moaned. "No. We might not ever see Iris alive again. Please, go to her. Please, Rose, I'm begging you. I'm gonna be okay, but Iris might not be. Please."

Rose ran her hand over Lily's head. "Okay, okay, sweet Lily. I"ll go. I love you, Lily," Rose said as she let the tears come. "I love you. Get better fast, okay?"

"Okay," Lily said softly. "Don't get everyone all worried about me. I'm sure I'm gonna be fine. Please, God, don't let Iris die before I can get to see her," Lily pleaded aloud.

The gate alarm went off and Rose quickly let the paramedics in.

She stayed and watched as they worked on her. It was all a blur. It seemed only seconds later they were transporting Lily and Justice was pulling away behind them. Rose looked up at Jericho. "Tell me, Jericho, what do you really think?"

He sighed. "I'm not a doctor but she was displaying symptoms of a possible stroke, or worse."

"Worse? What could be worse?"

"Something with the brain. Like an aneurysm, a subdural hematoma, brain tumor,

it's really not good to speculate. The doctor is gonna keep me informed. I told him what's going on. He understands the gravity of the situation for your family. Let's head up to see and lay hands on Iris and hopefully we'll know something by then."

Rose sniffed and nodded. "Okay, let's go. I don't know how I'm gonna tell everyone more bad news."

"I'll tell them. I got you, babe. God's got you too."

✝✝✝

January 29th 4:30 PM Wednesday Afternoon

Pine Forest Memorial Hospital, Pine Forest, Georgia

Justice was grateful when they finally let him back to be with Lily. Apparently everybody in town knows and loves the Tanners and are all praying for Iris. Now they are trying to take care of Lily. She was already in a hospital gown. Her face was pale. Her eyes closed.

He came forward and took her hand and her eyes opened.

"Hello," he said softly.

"Justice?"

"Yeah, it's me. Are you still having trouble seeing?"

"Yes. Everything is blurry. My head hurts so bad."

"I know, baby. So, they told me that they're getting ready to do a CTA, which they said is a CT scan of your brain with some dye injected so they get a good contrast. They've already administered the dye."

Lily frowned. "Is that what they shot into the IV?"

"Yes."

"So, a scan of my brain, that means they think there might be something wrong with my brain?"

He sighed. "Maybe. They haven't really told me much yet. I think they're waiting until they know more."

"Do you think it will take long? I mean, because I really want to get out of here and go see my sister."

"I understand."

Lily sniffed. "I'm so sad, Justice. I love her so much. I can't imagine life without my sweet Iris," she said and began to cry.

Justice hugged her while she sobbed until the radiology tech came to take her for the scan.

"Justice," she said before she was wheeled out.

"Yes, Lily?"

"I love you."

He nodded and choked back the emotion. "I love you too, Lily."

"You do?"

"I do," he said as they left.

"Mr. Sawyer," the nurse said. "She'll be gone about twenty minutes or so. When she's finished she'll come back to this room, so you're welcome to wait here if you'd like."

"Thank you. So, can you tell me what might be wrong with her?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I'm not allowed to say, but the doctor will speak with you after they get back."

He nodded. "Thank you."

Deciding to use the time to call his grandfather and fill him on the latest. His grandfather felt sure that Iris' sudden illness was an attack by the enemy. Justice felt the same way about whatever is happening to Lily.

"Hello, Justice," Thomas said wearily.

"Granddad, something happened to Lily."

"Yes, I know. Rose called Mrs. Appel to get everyone to add Lily to the prayer circle. Do you know exactly what's wrong with her yet?"

"Not yet. Jericho didn't give any hints as to what he thought was wrong. But I overheard him talking to the ER doctor and I heard him mention a possible stroke. Whatever it is, she doesn't realize how serious her condition is. She expects they're gonna run some tests and release her. She's desperate to get up there to see Iris."

"A stroke. Meningitis. They always seem to go after the brain. That's how they operate. Your grandma Clara had a ruptured brain aneurysm. I didn't realize it back then, but I think that was also the enemy. I've been on the phone with Dr. Kino Wallace and with her father. The doctor will go straight to *Children's* to diagnose Iris and when she's done there, she'll come to Pine Forest to examine Lily. In the meantime, us eleven will meet together here at the Inn and then head over to the house and get a feel for what's going on, then meet back here again with Dr. Kino Wallace. It's gonna be a long night."

"Granddad," Justice began and then stopped and drew a deep breath. "Granddad, do you think we're gonna be able to stop what's happening? Or do you think we're gonna lose Iris and Lily. Because, I mean, I just don't know if I can take another loss, if I can survive another loss. I love her, Granddad. I really do. I know I haven't known her that long, but she's so easy to love. She's so perfect for me. She brought me back to life. I don't think I can handle this."

"Well now, Justice, that's exactly what these demons are hoping you would say. That's what Knox said. He gave into grief and locked himself in his room with a bottle and made everyone miserable."

Justice was silent a minute. "You're right. That's what they want to hear. That's what they want me to do. That's what they want the Tanners to do." He drew a deep breath. "Okay then. I won't let that happen. But please, dear Lord Jesus, please help me to be strong."

"Amen," Thomas said. "Now, let's look at this logically. Logically, I think we're gonna win this war. Think about it. Why would God call the twelve together so urgently? Why would He send them here to Pine Forest? Going back further, why would He send you here?"

"But He sent my family here and *they* were defeated."

"True. We were not prepared. We did not understand the level of power of the bad guys. In essence, we sent lambs to the slaughter. Though, we don't know what God's

plan was for my Thomas, or Paula or Clara or Ethan. Still, we know now, Justice, what we're up against. We know we were supposed to come here. We know you were suppose to meet Lily, a young girl who's been fascinated by our family history most of her life. That's not a coincidence. There's no such thing. And by the way, I love her too. I love Iris too. I love the Tanners. I feel like God is arranging a giant battle and that this time we will win. Though, I don't know if there will be casualties, but I'm gonna go in thinking that we can win with no casualties at all. There is just no other way to go into battle."

Justice agreed with his grandfather and looked up as they wheeled Lily back into the room. "Oh, Granddad, she's back from her scan. Let me talk to the doctor and I'll get back to you."

"Stay strong, son."

"Yes sir. I'm trying."

The tech hung Lily's IV bag back up. Justice moved forward and took her hand and smiled at her. "Hey, you okay?"

"I think so," she mumbled. "I'm still dizzy."

The nurse came back in immediately and got her situated and right behind her the doctor came in.

"Mr. Sawyer, I'm Doctor Filmore."

Justice offered his hand. "Doctor, can you tell us anything?"

"Is any of her family here?"

"No sir. Lily has a sister who is currently in critical condition up at *Children's* in Atlanta. That's where we were headed when Lily suddenly felt sick."

"Yes, I know about Iris."

Justice nodded. "The paramedic who first attended to Lily felt we had an emergency. I overheard him speak with a doctor and he felt it was possibly a stroke. Now, I'm not blood related, but I *am*, um, I'm her fiancé."

Lily's eyes opened wide, but she didn't deny it.

The doctor turned to address Lily. "Miss Tanner, do you want me to include him in this discussion?"

She nodded. "Yes. He'll be my husband soon, so why not?"

Justice smiled at her.

"Okay, well," Dr. Filmore began, "the paramedic was astute. However, it wasn't a stroke. At least not yet. She *is* a very sick young lady. The scan shows a brain aneurysm. It has not ruptured, but it very well could. It's actually on the large scale. It's twelve millimeters. If it ruptures, it could cause severe stroke, brain damage, or death."

Justice's heart rate doubled. "So, what is the treatment?" he asked.

"Surgery. Probably a surgical clipping of the aneurysm. Though I won't do the surgery. I'll have to consult with a neurosurgeon and we do not have one on staff here. But..."

"Our family is good friends with Dr. Kino Wallace," Justice said quickly. "I mean, the Tanner family is. She's a neurosurgeon and she's actually on her way here. She was flying in from California to see about the Tanners sick daughter up in Atlanta. I was told

that she intends to come here to see Lily too."

"That would be advantageous if she would come and consult on this case, perhaps even perform the surgery. Can you put me in touch with her?"

"Yes sir, I can. I don't have her number, but I'll call the Tanners and ask them to ask her to call you."

"Very well. I'll look forward to it. In the meantime we'll be moving Miss Tanner up to ICU."

"Will I be able to stay with her?"

"Yes. Why don't you go ahead and make your call while we get her situated. I'm anxious to know which way I need to move on this."

"Yes sir," Justice said as he took out his phone.

✝✝✝

January 29th 5:15 PM Wednesday Evening

Children's Hospital, Atlanta, Georgia

"...when skies are gray. You'll never know dear, how much I love you. Please don't take, my sunshine, away," Lizzy sang softly as she ran her hand over Iris' soft curls. She looked upward after that last line, tears streaming down her face. "Please dear God, please don't take her away. Please," she said again and then wiped her tears and laid her forehead against Iris' hand.

"Amen," Violet said softly and then added another prayer as she softly stroked Iris' shoulder and arm.

Iris' eyes were closed, her breathing, shallow. She suddenly coughed a shallow cough. "Mommy," she said softly.

Lizzy gasped and looked up. "Yes, baby, mommy is right here."

"Mommy I don't feel good."

"I know sweetie. The doctors are trying to make you better."

"I want Gabe."

"He's on his way. He's on an airplane right now and on his way right here to see you."

The child smiled, closed her eyes and slept.

Meanwhile in the waiting room Keegan, Heather, Nolan, CJ and Daisy listened as Rose and Jericho went over again what had taken place with Lily. They'd all been on pins and needles waiting for a call from Justice.

It was Keegan who looked down when his phone buzzed. He answered and put it on speaker. "Yes, Justice, go ahead, you're on speaker. Tell me you have good news."

"Oh how I wish I could. Listen before I fill you in, I need you to call Dr. Kino and get her to call Dr. Filmore who is the doctor taking care of Lily right now. I told him she was coming and he could consult with her. I hope that wasn't wrong."

"No, that's correct. What's his number?"

Justice gave the information and Rose immediately placed a call to Jeffy, quickly explained the situation and gave her the doctor's number.

"Okay, Justice, what's going on with Lily?" Keegan asked again.

Justice sighed and filled them in on what he knew so far.

Daisy's eyes immediately filled with tears and she turn to burrow her face against her father's chest.

Heather turned to Nolan and cried. "What in the world is going on?"

Keegan swallowed, and put his arm around Daisy. "Go on, Justice."

"They've given her some pain reliever with codeine because her headache is severe, so she's drifting in and out. Ya know, Rose was gonna stay here with her, but Lily insisted she leave because Lily was thinking that they would simply run some tests on her and release her so she can get up there to see Iris. She doesn't know how serious this is."

"Daddy," Rose said softly. "What are we gonna do?"

Keegan sighed at the desperation in his daughter's voice. He drew a deep breath, quickly asking God what in the world could he say to help his family when his own heart was breaking. He wanted to break down and cry with them, but then who could they turn to? They turn to him because he's the man, the father, the one who is supposed to protect them and take care of them. If he let's this defeat him, they will be lost too. Gratefully, he felt his mind relax and flood with words and he spoke them.

"Okay, we're gonna do the exact same thing we're doing with Iris. We're gonna pray for healing. We're gonna accept God's will. If we lose them, we're gonna mourn them. What we are NOT gonna do is let this break us. We are not gonna become bitter. We are not gonna turn our backs on God. We will look to Him for comfort and peace and trust that His plan is perfect and good. Maybe there's more at stake here than we know. We know God is real. He's shown us too many miracles to deny it. So, we have to show Him that we trust Him. Not just in the things that are easy for us and make us happy, but in the things that are hard. And this, well, this is the hardest thing of all." He stopped because his emotions welled up for a moment and he had to get control.

Daisy sniffed. "Daddy, I need to go to her."

Keegan nodded at Lily's twin. "I understand, baby girl. I do too. We'll go together. But first I have to break all of this to your mom, and I know you want to spend some time with Iris before we leave, and I do too, I mean, well, just in case."

Daisy nodded, but the grief welled up. "Oh, Daddy, I don't think I can do this. I can't handle this. I love them both so much."

"It's okay to grieve, baby girl. Be sad. Cry. Mostly, pray. As a matter of fact, everyone gather around. Justice? Are you still there?"

"Yes sir."

"I'm gonna pray over my family. Can you put the phone so that Lily can hear, even if she's asleep?"

"Yes sir. I've put it right next to her ear."

Keegan nodded and began to pray over his sick girls, over his whole family, over his wife, over the twelve, whomever the twelfth one was, over the power of three generations, over the power of friendship and the power of brotherhood and over everyone involved, which was a considerable amount of people.

✝✝✝

January 29th 7:56 PM Wednesday Evening

Pine Forest Memorial Hospital

It shouldn't have surprised Keegan at the way his sweet Elizabeth Tanner took the news. She didn't break down. She remained stoic, strong, unwavering, just as she had been at Gabriel's bedside last year. It was like she'd switched into another gear. A low gear, working to get up the hill. Focus on the hill. It was the gear she'd been in when he'd met her. His wife was a very strong woman. Her will was strong. Her faith was strong. He knew that from the moment he'd met her in that little house in Tyler Springs. So, he shouldn't be surprised.

He'd never understood exactly what they meant in that movie, *Steel Magnolias*, until he'd watched his wife handle a crisis. She was definitely a steel magnolia. Beautiful, sweet, and strong. The weaker sex was a poor description of a woman, at least the ones like his Lizzy. She was in survival mode right now. One foot in front of the other. Take care of Iris, the youngest sick one, take care of the babies the helpless ones, take care of Lily, the older sick one, take care of her family by being strong, and even taking care of her husband, by standing strong by his side. The gratitude he felt for this woman was unmeasurable, and the love he felt made him strong.

Of course, she'd cried, but immediately wiped the tears away and got to work. She went out to the waiting room and let Keegan and Daisy spend some time with Iris. She'd called Jodi to check on the babies and let her know Keegan would be coming with more milk. She'd gathered her girls and their mates around her and got Gabe on the phone, and prayed with them and then joined a Zoom call that Taylor, Bree and Shelley Kino had arranged and they all prayed together again.

Lizzy and Keegan had decided that after he spent some time possibly saying goodbye to his sweet flower girl, Iris, he and Daisy would head down to be with Lily. Sweet Lily should not be without a family member with her. Jeffy and Gabe would arrive soon, so Lizzy pushed Keegan to go be with Lily. She even had the presence of mind to send with him more bags of breast milk for the babies. She was taking care of business, like she always did, without complaint, without bitterness, maybe a little weepy, but that didn't stop her. She'd hugged him, kissed him, told him to drive safely because she was handling all she could handle right now, and sent him off.

It was almost 8:00 PM when Keegan and Daisy pulled into the parking lot of the *Pine Forest Memorial Hospital*. John Appel met him at the door.

"John," Keegan muttered.

John sighed and hugged his dear friend.

"Keeg, hang in there."

"Nothing else to do but that," Keegan said softly.

John then hugged Daisy. "Hey sweet girl. Stay strong."

"I'm trying Uncle John. Have you seen her?"

"Yes. She's pretty sedated by the meds they're giving her for inflammation." He looked at Keegan. "I laid hands on her. Justice and Thomas and I. Then Thomas went back to the Inn to make arrangements for the big meeting with the twelve and all the others, but I wanted to wait for you. Besides, Jodi said you'd have some milk for the babies?"

"Oh, yeah, it's in the cooler in my car."

"Okay. Give me your keys and I'll bring them right back to you."

Keegan nodded and handed off the keys. He was grateful for John taking care of the little things for him. He'd always done that. He looked to take care of small details in a crisis. That's the best way to serve.

John pocketed the keys. "First though, Keeg, let me take you back to Lily."

John ushered them back to see her. Daisy rushed right in to her sister's side. Took her hand, kissed her cheek, smoothed her hair back off her face and cried.

Keegan shook Justice's hand. The young man had a look of desperation in his eyes. Keegan nodded and put his hand on his shoulder. "Hang in there, son," he said kindly.

Justice nodded. "It's hard to see her like this."

"I understand."

"I love her, Mr. Tanner," Justice mumbled softly.

Keegan sighed. "I can see that you do. Hold on to that love. Don't let go. She's gonna need you."

"I won't let go." Justice looked deeply into the man's eyes. He was hurting. "Mr. Tanner, is there anything I can do for you?"

Keegan offered a slight smile. "Just keep praying."

"Yes sir. I haven't stopped. I won't stop. It's the least I can do after I brought this all on her."

"Is that what you're thinking, son? You're gonna have to stop that. I believe God brought you and my daughter together. Do you think He made a mistake? He has a plan. It seemed obvious from that first day I met you. So, you and I have to do better. We have to trust Him. And prayer is not the least you can do, it's the greatest, most important thing you can do. We have to fight. We're gonna fight this thing, Justice."

Justice sighed and nodded. "Until the very end, sir." He stepped aside and exited the cubicle to allow Lily's father to go be with her.

Keegan smiled at Daisy as he approached and finally allowed his eyes to gaze at Lily. The dynamic girl who was so confident in the kitchen, who was so loving and sweet and kind, appeared small and fragile. Her face was pale. Hooked up to an IV and an oxygen tube across her upper lip, made her appear pitiful. He ran his hand over her head, closed his eyes and prayed for her healing. When he opened his eyes, he saw Daisy looking at him.

"Daddy, do you think we're gonna lose her?" she asked, her voice hitching on the last few words.

Keegan sighed. "No. I mean, in my heart, I don't really feel like this is it for our Lily. But I don't know God's plan for her. Will she leave us? Will she live? Will there be brain damage? Will she be completely whole when all this is over? I just don't know."

Daisy's eyes filled and she sighed and wiped at her tears.

Keegan watched her. "Do you remember all those years ago when you were just four-years-old and that man took Lily?"

"Oh, I remember, Daddy. I was so scared. But you brought her back. I thought you

were a superhero."

Keegan sighed because he sure didn't feel like one right now.

"I wish it were that simple, Daddy, that you could just go fight the bad guys and bring her back."

Keegan almost gasped as the words she spoke reverberated in his brain. What was that? Was that God telling him that it *was* that simple? Did he dare hope that all he had to do was go fight the demons in that house?

"Maybe we can," Keegan said. "Maybe it will be that simple."

"Oh, I hope so, Daddy. Please save Lily for me. Please try hard."

Keegan's emotions welled up for a minute and he nodded his head and choked back the tears, the weight of her words feeling very heavy. His phone buzzed and he took the call.

"Hey, baby," he said wearily.

"Hi, Keegan. Jeffy and Cam have landed and are on the way here."

"Good, sweetheart. Maybe she'll be able to tell us some good news."

"Dear God, I hope so," Lizzy said softly, not bothering to disguise the desperation in her voice.

The sound broke his heart.

She cleared her throat. "So, how does Lily look to you? And Keegan, don't pull any punches."

"Okay, well, she looks tiny, pitiful and very pale. I haven't been here very long. She hasn't opened her eyes. They've given her something for the inflammation and it's keeping her sedated."

Lizzy sighed. "Okay, well, if she opens her eyes and says anything to you, try to record it, or get Daisy to record it."

"I will. Honey, would you like me to video call you right now?"

She sniffed. "Yes, would you do that?"

"Anything for you," he said and switched over to video and reversed the screen. "How's that. Can you see her?"

She sniffed again. "Oh my sweet girl." She was silent after that.

"You still there, Elizabeth?"

She cleared her throat. "Yes, I'm still here. Daisy, are you okay, baby?"

"I'm trying to be okay, Mom. I'm trying so hard."

"Me too," Lizzy said. "Please, dear Lord, please grant my Daisy some comfort and peace."

"Same for you, Mom. I love you."

"Love you too, sweetie." Lizzy choked back a sob. "Keegan, I, I can't remember if I told Lily that I love her this morning before I left."

Keegan felt his heart breaking.

"You did, Mom, I remember. You told us all."

"Good. Good," Lizzy whispered.

"Elizabeth, are you in with Iris right now?"

"Yes, I'm here with Heather."

"Hey, Dad," Heather said softly.

"Hey baby girl. Liz, before we end the call, can I see Iris again?"

"Oh, yes, of course." She turned the camera.

Keegan gazed at his little girl. It was so surreal. He longed for the times she crawled up in his lap and smacked his cheek to make him look at her when he was working. Or the piggy back rides. Or the silly stories. Or her singing with her mother and sisters, and pretending she could fly off that swing, making it smack Gabe in the head. His eyes teared and he cleared his throat. "Honey, will you put the phone near her ear?"

Lizzy did.

"Iris, my little flower girl, it's Daddy. I love you, baby girl. Be strong, okay? Be strong and fight. Daddy loves you so much."

Lizzy whimpered as she fought to hold back her tears. Daisy too. Heather too.

"Keegan, will you put the phone near Lily's ear?"

"Yes ma'am." He did it. "Go ahead, honey."

"Hey Lily. It's Mommy. Oh, my sweet girl, I love you so much. I'm not sure if I've told you just how proud I am of you and all the amazing things you've accomplished, but mostly how sweet and good and honest and strong you are. You keep being strong sweetie."

Lily opened her eyes. "Mommy?"

Lizzy gasped. "Yes, baby. It's Mom, I love you honey."

"Love you too, Mom," Lily said. "How's Iris?"

"She's sleeping right now."

"Tell her I love her," Lily said softly and closed her eyes.

"I will."

Keegan looked away. He felt like he was drowning. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't talk. He sniffed and had to swallow.

Daisy watched her father. He was so strong, trying to hold it all together for the sake of his family. She reached out and took his other hand and squeezed it. He nodded and cleared his throat.

"Elizabeth, let me know as soon as Jeffy examines Iris."

"I will."

"Okay, sweetheart. Talk to you soon."

"Okay."

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes?"

"I love you, babe. No matter what, I will never stop loving you."

"I love you too, Keegan," she said softly.

✝✝✝

Proverbs 19:21

"Many are the plans in the mind of a man,
but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand."

✝✝✝

Matthew 6:27
“And which of you by being anxious can
add a single hour to his span of life.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Still January 29th...

Cam, Jeffy and little Elijah pulled into the parking lot of the giant medical facility simply called '*Children's Hospital*.' The facility was large and state-of-the-art and extremely well-known for their thorough and loving treatment of very ill or injured children.

Jeffy texted Lizzy to let her know they were there and a few minutes later, CJ came to meet them and lead them up to the ICU waiting room.

Jeffy walked into the room and had to stop, breathe, and close herself off. The fear and despair emanating off of everyone was thick. She immediately approached Lizzy, wrapped her arms around her and hugged her a long time, then pulled away and looked deeply into her eyes.

"Mrs. Tanner, take a deep breath."

She did and Jeffy nodded. "Good. Keep breathing. Deep and slow. Good. Dear Jesus, I pray You will fill Mrs. Tanner with Your Holy Spirit, fill her with love and with peace and comfort." Jeffy smiled at her. "Okay. Let's not waste a minute of time. I'm gonna go speak with the doctor and then examine Iris. You all wait here, if you don't mind. I need a clear field in order to read her well. I tried all the way here and wasn't able to get a good read. That usually doesn't happen, so I want to try with no one else around, no strong emotions interfering."

"Yes, of course. We trust you, Dr. Kino, or uh, Dr. Wallace. I never know what to call you," Lizzy said, obviously rambling.

Jeffy smiled. "I go by either one. People knew me first as Dr. Kino. That's who I was when I received the Nobel, so it's okay to just call me that. But I did take my husband's name and so, Dr. Wallace is good too. A lot of people call me Dr. Kino Wallace. It doesn't really matter. Actually, Mrs. Tanner, just call me Jeffy. We're family."

Lizzy nodded. "Jeffy. Thank you."

"Okay, I'll be back when I finish. Gabe's plane landed just as we arrived at the hospital, so he too will be here soon."

The Tanner family all smiled. For some reason, just knowing that Gabe was almost there, suddenly it felt like a ray of hope.

Jeffy left to consult with Iris' doctors, a man, Dr. Williams, a neurologist, and a woman, Dr. Tran, an infectious disease doctor. She'd called ahead of time and let them know she would be in between 8:30 and 9:00 PM and would like to speak with them, in person or video call. They both elected to meet with her in person. That meeting lasted longer than she wanted it to last, because she was anxious to get in to see Iris, but the doctors wanted to get her thoughts, learn about her ways.

It had been difficult to help them to understand how Jeffy was able to go about diagnosing through reading a person. They were skeptical of this and Jeffy decided to get them on her side, she needed to prove it.

"I know it sounds strange, but it's a gift I've been given. For example," she said, and then held out her hand. "May I hold your hand a moment, Dr. Tran?"

The doctor smiled and placed her hand in Jeffy's. Jeffy closed her eyes. "Your blood pressure is currently slightly elevated. But that's easy. You have a small abnormal clump of cells in your left breast and you've made an appointment for an ultrasound to check it out. It's not cancerous. It is simply a thickening of cells that began from when you nursed your now three-year-old and weren't able to nurse often enough and you had clogged milk ducts. So, don't worry. You're fine."

Dr. Tran's eyes opened wide. "Well, that's correct and that's good to know, Dr. Kino. That is amazing."

"It's not me. It's God." She turned to Dr. Williams. "May I?'

He sighed. "Okay, I'll play." He placed his hand in hers.

She sighed. "You have type two diabetes being controlled by Metformin. Not good. I can help you with that, later if you'd like. We'll talk. Currently, I'd like to go examine Iris."

"Follow me," Dr. Tran said.

"Please don't be offended by this, but I'd like to see her alone. It's just that other people's thoughts and emotions interfere with my findings. But please, feel free to watch me through the window."

"Very well. I'll just lead you to her."

Jeffy smiled. "Not necessary." She nodded. "Excuse me." Turning, she headed straight to the room.

The two doctors followed her and watched through the window.

Jeffy entered the room and felt the blast of all of the lingering emotions and grief from the Tanner family. She waded through it and went to Iris' bedside and lifted her tiny hand in hers and squeezed it lovingly. She was still having a hard time reading her. She then lowered the bedside rail and placed her forehead on Iris' and closed her eyes.

✝✝✝

Still January 29th...

Gabe Tanner, young Eric Kino and JoJo and Logan Adams arrived at *Children's Hospital* and looked around the large, open vestibule area. They'd texted ahead and again, CJ went to meet them and lead them back.

He smiled at Gabe as he approached and held out his hand. "Gabe," he said warmly. "Good to see you."

Gabe nodded solemnly. "CJ."

CJ turned and nodded at the other three. "Guys, nice to see you."

"You as well," young Eric said softly.

"Well, come on up. The ICU is on the fourth floor. Gabe, your mom and sisters are very anxious to see you."

"How are they doing? I mean like, how are they handling this?"

CJ sighed. “Sometimes well, sometimes not so well. They are trying to be strong for each other and for Iris.”

Gabe nodded. “And my dad?”

CJ frowned. “Well, your father is, well, your father. Strong as usual. Holding everyone together. He’s down in Pine Forest right now, with Lily. You know about Lily, right?”

Gabe nodded. “Yes.”

As they walked through the lobby they didn’t even notice all the people stopping and pointing as they recognized the four very famous young men, all famous for different reasons.

CJ took them up to the waiting room. Lizzy, Rose, Jericho, Heather, Nolan, Cam and Violet all rose when they walked in.

Lizzy went straight to her son and he wrapped his arms around his mother and hugged her against his chest.

“Gabe, oh, Gabe, I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I love you, Mom, and I’m so sorry this is happening.”

She sniffed. “Me too.”

“We’ll get through this. It’s gonna be okay,” Gabe said firmly.

Lizzy sniffed. “Your voice sounds so deep, much deeper than usual. I almost thought it was your dad talking.”

Gabe smiled. “A great compliment.” He turned to hug his sisters and shake hands with Jericho and Nolan.

“Hey guys,” Rose said to JoJo, Logan and young Eric after she hugged Gabe. “I didn’t realize you guys would be here too.”

Young Eric smiled. “Gabe’s our brother and we go where he goes. That’s why we’re here. To support him in anything and everything, which means we’re here to support his family too.”

Jericho, Nolan and CJ all smiled. The west coast family was Christlike, as always, and that was comforting.

“But aren’t you missing school?” Rose asked.

“Iris is more important,” JoJo said.

“How is Iris?” Gabe asked.

Lizzy sighed. “Jeffy is in with her right now. Hopefully, she’ll be done soon and be able to tell us some good news.”

They all took a seat to wait. To occupy their minds, CJ asked Gabe how his training was coming along and Gabe told a few stories. Finally, the door opened and they all stood as Jeffy came into the room.

She didn’t smile. She didn’t give any information. She just pointed. “I need you men. Cam, hand the baby to someone. Gabe, young Eric JoJo, Logan, Jericho, CJ and Nolan. I can’t get in. It’s like a battle. It’s the demons. Right now, it’s like there are millions of them. Each tiny bacterium is a demon. I’m gonna need you to come in here, stand all around Iris, lay hands on her and rebuke those demons so I can get in. No time for discussion, just come.” She turned and walked out.

The guys followed her and did exactly what she said.

"What's all this?" Dr. Tran asked.

"We're fighting a battle and there's really no time to explain. They're gonna pray over her while I examine her. Look, I know so many in the room is against the rules, but they'll only be in there a minute or two. That's all I need. Just a few minutes. Please."

Dr. Tran nodded. "Well, of course, Dr. Kino, anything you need, anything you say, we'll abide by."

"Thank you," Jeffy said and headed into the room.

The guys spread out around Iris and laid hands on her.

"Just work silently," Jeffy said. "I need to concentrate."

She closed her eyes and bent her head to touch Iris'. "You cannot block me. I speak in the name of Jesus. You must obey. Move aside. Move, in Jesus' name," she commanded.

Jeffy felt as if she were in a dark cave. There were dark winged creatures like bats flying at her, all around her, dive bombing her. She commanded them to be gone and slowly they began to disperse. She still could not get a clear picture, but it was better. The infection was raging. There was pressure on the brain, her blood pressure was low. A bat creature flew at Jeffy's face, trying to tear at her eyes. She ducked and batted it away. Then several more. She ducked again, striking out and knocking them all down. "Pray harder," she said aloud.

Jeffy saw a light appear, just above her head and she moved toward it, coming upon a large, beautiful lush field of soft green grass. The sun was shining, the sky was a bright blue, the brightest blue she'd ever seen and looking out across the field, in the distance, she could see a tree. The tree. Her father's tree. Gabe's tree. It was ginormous. It's branches spread out wide, like a giant oak, but the leaves were thick and dense, like an olive tree. She squinted her eyes and looked closer, or somehow moved closer, and there she was, sweet tiny little Iris, looking tinier because of the enormity of the tree.

Knelt down on the grass in front of Iris was Jesus. He smiled and Iris ran into His arms and he held her tightly against his chest. Jeffy's eyes filled with tears. She couldn't have stopped them if she'd wanted, but she didn't want. She wanted to feel every single bit of what she was witnessing.

Then she wondered, does this mean that Iris died? Or was she, like Gabe, just visiting Jesus. Except Gabe wasn't allowed to go up under the tree, like her father had been. Gabe wasn't dead. Her father had been. She began to think she was too late. The bad guys won. Despair filled her. She closed her eyes. She so didn't want to break the news to Lizzy Tanner.

"There is no news yet to break."

She opened her eyes at the sound of the voice. A voice she knew. He was standing right there, smiling at her. Immediately, she fell to her knees. "Oh, dear Lord Jesus, is that really you?"

He gave a soft laugh. "Verily," he said and then bent down and helped her to her feet. He tilted her face up.

"Listen to me, my good servant, my good shepherd, remember what I'm gonna tell

you."

She nodded, her eyes open wide.

"What's about to take place is important. Not just to the Tanner family and the Sawyer family, but to the world. This is a precursor to things that must be accomplished later. You, the twelve, and all those you brought with you and those here, must cleanse that house. There is something you must do. I must not say it yet, but I will when the time is right, to the leader of the twelve. Go by faith. I will give him the information."

Jeffy nodded. "Lord, You said, the twelve, but You still haven't given us the name of the twelfth man."

He smiled. "I'm about to tell you a story, June Flower Kino Wallace. Listen carefully. I want you to remember it."

She nodded tearfully and listened very hard to every single detail, her eyes opening wide and her mind racing with the information.

When He finished the telling he nodded and smiled. "I'm leaving it up to you and your family to win this battle. I will be with you. Don't give up. Don't give into fear. Don't stop. Don't falter. Fill your hearts with love. Fill your minds with faith. Surrender. Let go. Tell them all to let go and abide by the will of God. Some have done this already. Some have not. They must walk the walk. This battle will make your father and the others strong and may very well save lives, and even more importantly, save souls."

He smiled again. Jeffy blinked, because His smile, it was like, a balm, a cozy blanket, it was love. Pure love. "Go back now, June Flower. Go to that meeting and tell them what I've told you. Do not speak what I've told you to anyone until you are surrounded by the twelve and the others that came, meaning the three powers; three generations, friendship, and brotherhood. There is an important fourth power, but they will not need to be physically present. They are ever present."

She smiled. "You mean God the Father, His Son and the Holy Ghost?"

Jesus laughed softly and His next words surprised her. "No. I mean an *earthly* fourth power that is ever present. Now, time to head back."

She nodded and turned and looked the way she'd come but the way was completely blocked by the dark winged creatures, flying in a frenzy, waiting for her to come back through them, claws ready, jaws open showing rows of sharp teeth. She looked back at Jesus, her fear evident. "How do I get through that?"

He sighed. "Be gone," he said quietly.

She looked again and the way was completely clear.

"Go now," He said. "Don't forget what I've told you."

"May I hug you?" she asked.

He smiled and held his arms open. She stepped into His embrace.

"Go."

She turned and headed back through a tunnel and opened her eyes.

"Jeffy?" Cam said. "Did you get anything?"

She raised her head from Iris and looked around her.

"How long was I like that?"

Cam shrugged. “Just a few seconds, maybe almost a minute. Why?”

She shook her head. “It felt like I’d been gone for hours.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Um, well, I really can’t tell you what I learned yet. But I can say that I was in the place.” She turned to Gabe. “At the tree. I was there. And so was Iris.”

Gabe looked disturbed by that information.

Jeffy went on. “And I saw Jesus, and He spoke to me and it was awesome and I can’t tell you what He said to me until we all meet together. All the men and myself of course.”

“Did you ask Jesus if He would spare Iris, or Lily?” Gabe asked her.

She touched his face gently. “I didn’t have to ask. He knew that’s what we all want. I can’t tell you what He said, because He wasn’t really clear about that. I know He wants us to surrender to God’s will and let go of our own desires.”

Gabe sighed and closed his eyes. What did he expect? Of course, that is exactly what Jesus would want them to do.

“Dr. Kino?” Dr. Williams said. “I don’t know what you did, but Iris’ blood pressure has stabilized and her fever is down.”

Jeffy looked over at the other doctor.

Dr. Tran nodded her head. “What did you do?”

Jeffy frowned. “That happens sometimes when I examine someone. That might be temporary, but at least for now, she has some time to allow the antibiotics to work and she can rest well and gather her strength.” Jeffy knew that was probably because of Jesus making the demon bat things go away.

“Well, you bought her some time. I believe I’ve witnessed a little miracle here tonight,” Dr. Tran said.

Jeffy sighed. “Hopefully, we’ll see a big miracle coming up soon.”

“Yes, hopefully,” Dr. Williams mumbled.

He and Dr. Tran left the room.

Jeffy put her hand on Gabe’s shoulder. “Well, guys, I have to make my way down to Lily. Are you coming?”

Gabe nodded. “Soon. I want to spend a little time with Iris before I leave. But I won’t be too long.”

“Don’t be, because you guys have to attend a meeting.”

“Aren’t the men already at the meeting?” Gabe asked.

“Yes. And then they’re going over to assess the house and then they’re going back to the Inn for *another* meeting with all the men and that includes you and your father and it’s important you all be there.”

Gabe nodded. “Does my father know about this meeting?”

“I’m not sure, but probably Mr. Sawyer told him.”

“Okay. Well, I’m gonna visit with Iris and then I’ll call Dad to make sure he knows. Looks like it’s gonna be a late night.”

Jeffy sighed. “Yes it is, but that’s no biggie. We got this.”

Gabe offered a small smile. “We got this,” he repeated. “Mom is gonna want to

know what you found out," he reminded her.

Jeffy's lips pressed together. "I don't want to give her false hope, but Iris is doing a little better and giving her that time, slowing down that freight train, very well might make a bigger difference than we know."

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, tell her that."

✝✝✝

Still January 29th...

Though Lizzy was trying to be strong, she needed to hear her husband's voice again, and so she called him, and she *did* have news to share. Though it wasn't much, it was something.

"Hello, Elizabeth," Keegan said when he answered the call.

Lizzy frowned. His deep voice sounded so weary, sad, miserable.

"Hi Keegan. Are you okay?"

He sighed. He needed to do better. "I'm not sure 'okay' is the right word," he began, trying to sound strong and positive. "But, we'll get through this my love. How's Gabe?"

"Gabe is, well, he seems different," Lizzy said.

"How so?"

"Well first, his appearance. I mean, he looks much bigger, and like, all muscle. And taller too, maybe."

"Honey, he's only been gone a few weeks."

"Well, he looks different. I can't explain it. But that's really not what I mean anyway. He seems very– calm. Very strong. I haven't had a chance to really speak with him at length yet, to see where his mind is at. Right now, he and Logan are right next to Iris and he appears to be singing to her. He and JoJo prayed over her and he and young Eric laid hands on her."

Keegan nodded. "Good. That does sound strong. It sounds like he's handling it better than I thought he would. Is Jeffy finished examining her?"

"Yes, that's really why I called you, other than needing to hear your voice. Jeffy finished examining Iris, she spoke to the doctors and is now on the way down there to see Lily."

"Okay, lay it on me. What did she say? You don't sound too excited."

Lizzy drew a calming breath. "Well, I don't know what I was expecting. I guess I was hoping she'd come in and simply cure her completely, like when she healed the bruises on Gabe's chest. So, that didn't happen. She did say that Iris' diagnosis is correct. She has acute bacterial meningitis. But Jeffy says the origins of her illness are not natural. She says the demons from that house are going after her, making her sick. They are the origin. They are bound and determined to bring the Tanners down, and snuff them out because our light is too bright. Her words, not mine."

Keegan sighed.

"She says the importance of cleansing that place is ultra-important, but to be honest, she doesn't know if that in itself will save our girls because the disease may have progressed too far. However, she was able to slow down the disease. When Jeffy

finished with Iris, her blood pressure had regulated, her fever had gone down and she's actually spoken to Gabe a few times. The doctors said that Jeffy, at the very least, bought Iris some time."

Keegan nodded his head. "Okay. We'll take that as a win."

"I just wish I really understood what's happening. I don't get it."

"It's hard to understand," Keegan said. "Sometimes we just have to walk by faith and I'm trying hard to do that, baby. I'm trying."

"I know, Keegan. And I'm trying too, and you're helping me."

Keegan sighed, because he didn't feel like he was helping his family. He felt completely useless.

"Hello? Keegan are you still there?"

"I'm here. Sorry, I was just thinking about things. Elizabeth, the bad guys want to destroy our family and we cannot let that happen, no matter what, Elizabeth, we have to stay strong. We have to stay close to God. We can't let this destroy the family. We can't let them win."

Lizzy nodded. "I'm trying, but it hurts so much, Keegan. I'm not sure I can bear losing my daughters."

"I hear you, sweetheart. I hear you and I understand, and it hurts, but if God wants us to carry this cross, we will. I don't know what else to say."

"Okay," she sighed. There really was nothing else to say, she thought. "Well, let me know what Jeffy says about Lily. Let me know immediately if they say they need to operate."

"I'll let you know."

✝✝✝

Still January 29th...

Cam, Jeffy and little Elijah pulled into the parking lot of *Pine Forest Memorial Hospital.* It was not a bad facility. Not tiny. Not big. But big enough to service three counties in the area, Pine, Upton and Marla.

Inside it seemed to be a fairly decent facility with personnel who loved what they do. They went in through the ER and Jeffy was quickly led back to speak with Dr. Filmore.

He shook her hand and immediately told her again what an honor it was to meet her. She thanked him and got down to business. They went over the lab results and the CT scan, and then Jeffy asked to examine Lily. Alone.

She explained why she needed to do it alone, and Dr. Filmore said he understood. He said he'd heard reports from other doctors at the *Feeding of the Five Thousand* event who'd explained how she worked intuitively. He'd heard the reports of the miracles and he was so intrigued that he'd finally begun to study the medical books that she'd written. He was a fan indeed and all in on her work. That made things a little easier.

Jeffy headed to the room and saw Justice standing just outside, watching through the large window. She stopped. "You're Justice Sawyer?" Jeffy asked, though she already knew.

"Yes."

"I'm Dr. Kino Wallace."

He smiled and nodded at the beautiful woman. "It's very nice to meet you, Doctor. Tell me you're here to fix Lily."

She sighed. "Well, I'm gonna try." She looked into his eyes. "Justice, you love her very much."

His eyes opened wide. "Um, yes ma'am."

"We're the same age, you don't have to call me 'ma'am'."

"Just showing my great respect."

She smiled. "Noted. Well, let me get to our girl and see what's goin' on. I'll keep you informed."

She headed into the room. Keegan and Daisy were there. She hugged them both and frowned. "I know you're worried and oh so sad. Let me see what I can do and I'll get back to you. May I have the room?"

Keegan nodded. "Of course, Jeffy. Thank you so much for coming."

"Anything for you Tanners," she said sweetly. She touched his arm. "Hold on, Mr. Tanner."

"Trying to," he muttered.

"Cam is in the waiting room with Eli. Why don't you and Daisy and Justice go in there and let me have some alone time with Lily."

Keegan nodded. "Oh, yes, of course." He looked at Daisy. "Come on honey, let's allow Dr. Kino to do her thing."

Daisy nodded, hugged Jeffy and then left the room with her father.

Jeffy went to Lily, lowered the bed rail and leaned over her and touched her forehead to Lily's. "Oh, sweet girl," Jeffy whispered. She let her mind travel the blood vessels in Lily's brain. She arrived at the aneurysm and examined it closely. Something was not right. It was the same thing as Iris. Something was not right. She couldn't pinpoint what she was thinking. There was darkness all around and she couldn't get a clear picture of the problem. This was not a bunch of snarling bat-like creatures but one very large dark blob, an entity, like a dark cloud with red eyes. "Let me pass," Jeffy commanded.

The thing opened a gaping hole as a mouth and laughed.

Jeffy drew a deep breath, pushing down any fear. "I command you to let me pass in the name of Jesus Christ."

The thing didn't leave, but it shrunk down enough where Jeffy could walk past it and into the light.

Again, she was in the green meadow, the giant tree in the distance. But this time she didn't see Lily under the tree and she didn't see Jesus. What does that mean, Jeffy wondered. Does that mean that Lily won't survive? Does that mean that Iris will? Or does it mean the opposite? Why do I not see Jesus this time? "Dear Lord Jesus," Jeffy called out. "Can you hear me? Are you there? What does this mean that you're not here this time?"

"Reason it out, June Flower."

Jeffy breathed a sigh of relief in hearing His voice, and tried to reason. "Um, so,

I thought you weren't here and so..."

Silence.

"And so," she went on, "so I thought maybe that meant you won't heal Lily, but you were with Iris and maybe you WILL heal her?"

"You're not being logical. What does it usually mean, June Flower, when you can't see me?"

"Um, okay, so usually, when I can't see You, I, well, I know You're there even when I don't see You, because usually, I *don't* see You, though I do hear You or feel You."

"Better. Keep going."

Jeffy nodded, beginning to understand. "So, even though I don't see You, I should know that You're there, that You're with me, and that You'll direct me or help me. I won't always see You, but You're always with me."

"Very good. The message is the same as it was with Iris. I will be with you in this hard thing. Don't give up. Don't give into fear. Don't stop. Don't falter. Fill your hearts with love. Fill your minds with faith. Surrender. Let go. Tell them all to let go and abide by the will of God."

Jeffy nodded. "Will You allow me to heal Lily?"

"One step at a time, June Flower. You know that many times it is simply someone's time to come home."

"Is it Lily's? Is it Iris'? I don't mean to be disrespectful. It's just that, Gabe, he loves them so much and it will break him."

"Fear not, June Flower, Gabe will not break."

Her eyes filled with tears because that sounded like either one or both of them might pass. Sweet little Iris, with her big blue eyes and her happy demeanor, and sweet Lily, with her kind spirit and her longing to finally be loved by a man." She sniffed, and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. Lord, I will abide by Your will. But it's not in me to simply give up on anyone."

"You have your freewill. I know whom you serve. It is your calling to heal. Do what you have been called to do."

Jeffy nodded. She looked back to see if she could pass through, but it seemed as if the dark blob was larger, now with two sets of red glowing eyes. Turning she faced the blob. "Jesus help me," she muttered at she headed toward it. It tried to block her, tried to restrain her, tried to stop her but she kept going, pushing through the darkness and finally opened her eyes. She pulled back and stroked Lily's face. "I love you, sweet girl," she whispered softly. "Jesus loves you too. Hang in there."

She left the room and went to speak with the three in the waiting room who looked at her with such hopeful eyes.

She swallowed and drew a deep breath. "Hey guys. So, I'm afraid I don't have much I can tell you yet. There is an aneurysm. It is large. We may have to go in and clip it. If we do, it will probably be scheduled for tomorrow."

"Is this a dangerous surgery?" Daisy asked.

"Well, all surgery is dangerous. Brain surgery is complicated and carries several

risks."

"Would you do the surgery?" Justice asked.

"Yes I will if I deem it necessary. I feel like the aneurysm might burst but I want to wait until tomorrow. We have some important things to take care of tonight. If we do that, things might change."

"Are you talking about the house?" Justice asked.

She nodded. "What's in that house is powerful and those demons have outright attacked both Lily and Iris."

Keegan stayed silent as he thought about this. The whole thing seemed surreal and impossible, yet, hadn't demons attacking humans been the cause of so many horrendous events since the beginning? Keegan knew God is real and that means that the demons are real. Jesus rebuked them many times in the Bible. They are real, and they want to end his girls. He felt helpless and useless.

Jeffy smiled at him. "Mr. Tanner, I have some preparations to make, but first, we have a meeting that is important. Jesus told me specifically, that you need to be there. I know you feel like nothing is more important than your sick daughters right now, but one affects the other."

He nodded. "I'll be there," he said quietly. "I have to go to the house and get some things for Lizzy and then I'll be over to the Inn."

Jeffy nodded. The man was in so much turmoil. His heart was breaking and he was trying to figure out how he can keep the rest of his family safe, and how to keep them from the same heartbreak, and how he can keep them from falling completely apart when his daughters succumb.

Jeffy turned to Justice. "Okay, then. Justice, you too need to be at the meeting. All the men."

Justice nodded.

"I'll stay with Lily," Daisy assured Justice and her father. "She'll be okay until you get back."

Keegan let out a sigh and nodded.

✝✝✝

At the same time that Jeffy had arrived at the *Pine Forest Memorial Hospital*, Jason Lee, at the wheel of an Ameritech SUV, turned right on Main Street, passed the *GTCC* on his left and then *Appel Martial Arts* on his right. Just before the light at Pine Street, he swung left and pulled into a parking space right in front of the old Sawyer House, which was now "Lily's Place." Ricky Kino sat in the passenger seat beside him, and in the back seat, Justin Lee and Eric Kino sat silently. They all looked up at the home. If you include the attic, it was actually three stories, plus a large, unfinished basement.

The place was in the middle of renovations. They'd been told that the brick had been cleaned. A few missing bricks replaced. Some accents repaired. The integrity of the historic building had been preserved, but there were large differences in its appearance. The battered and broken single front door on the left front side of the home had been replaced now with a large, antique double door, with glass inserts and

sidelights. The tiny broken down front porch was now a large front deck that was as wide as the house. What had once been a double set of windows in the front of the house was now a beautiful giant picture window that looked out over the front deck and then Main Street. "Lily's Place" would eventually be etched on the glass of that window, in sunset yellow, and a lily logo on either side of the lettering.

Eric looked up at the building, drew a deep breath and opened his car door. "You guys stay here a minute, please."

They didn't respond, but just watched as he got out of the car and went to stand on the walkway in front of the house. It was dark outside, but there was plenty of light coming from the street lights. Eric stood there, gazing up at the place. It was hard to believe that such a pretty building was housing such evil and causing such havoc in the lives of the Sawyers and Tanners.

The other ten men, would be arriving any minute. Eric asked to be able to assess the place alone first. His gaze shifted to the upper windows when he thought he saw movement. He sighed and closed his eyes. *Father, he silently prayed. Father if it really is me that You want to lead the group of twelve against these dark forces, then please show me what I need to do. Please show me what we're facing. Show me the enemy and tell me how to defeat it. I pray you will lead me and guide me. Give me strength and wisdom and protect us as we fight this battle. And please, Father, if it be Your will, please heal Iris and Lily, your sweet daughters who love You. Right now though, Father, if I am to lead, I need to know what we're facing. Show me. Show me I pray.*

"Open your eyes."

Almost startled by the voice, he obeyed. He had to blink several times. It appeared a large, black tornado was swirling slowly all around the building. It appeared things inside were being thrown around. Through the window he could see lighting that had recently been hung, swinging violently in circles. Boards and nails and tools were flying through the air. He looked closer at the tornado that surrounded the house and realized it wasn't a storm cloud, but hundreds or even thousands of entities, dark swirling shadows of beings with snarling faces and limp bodies, flying around the place going at least fifty feet into the air. They were screaming obscenities, daring him to enter the building.

"Look to your left," he heard, and did so.

The small little park that was right next door and the *Gabe Tanner Community Center* on the other side of the park, were glowing with a soft, golden light. Shielded, protected. He turned and looked behind him. *Appel Martial Arts* was also glowing. He looked up and down the street. Almost all of it was glowing with light, some places brighter than others. Joe's, down the street was very bright.

"Why, in this tiny town so filled with light, is this vortex of darkness here?" Eric asked softly.

"There are many unlikely places on this earth, unlikely to human eyes, where big things will take place. The enemy would like to stop that from happening. The Twelve must come together and defeat this darkness."

Eric's brow furrowed. He felt the voice he was hearing was familiar, but it was not

the familiar power that was Jesus. “Who am I speaking with?”

“You tell me. I know you recognize my voice.”

Eric nodded. “My angel? The one who appeared to me 60 years ago?”

“Yes, young Eric, and you’ve done well. Our Father is pleased with you. You must continue to be strong now.”

“What do I do to defeat all of this?” he asked, gesturing at the giant storm raging around and through the house.

“You will know when it’s time.”

Eric nodded. Again, he was being asked to go by faith. A few more cars pulled up and parked in front of the house. Eric almost fell over at the abrupt change in air pressure. He looked back at the car that held his son Ricky, and his loyal friends, Justin and Jason Lee. They were getting out of the car. Justin walked up to speak to Eric.

“You okay?”

Eric nodded. “Did you see anything unusual?”

Justin shook his head. “No. Did you?”

Eric drew a deep breath. “Oh yeah. You didn’t see or hear anything at all?” he pressed.

“No. Only odd thing I saw was you staring up at the house and moving your lips as if you were speaking. I figured you were praying.”

He turned and looked deeply into Justin’s eyes and smiled. “Justin, my friend, my angel just came back and spoke to me.”

Justin smiled and put his hand on Eric’s shoulder in congratulations, because he knew Eric had always wished he could speak to him again. “Did he look the same as before?”

Eric shook his head. “I didn’t see him, but he spoke to me. I could hear him. He showed me things.”

The conversation ended as ten others joined them on the walk in front of the house. It wasn’t everyone that Jeffy had mentioned, but they would all be there when they meet back at the Inn in a little while.

They all gazed up at the house. Each man was silent. Listening. Assessing. It was Billy Wallace who finally spoke.

“So, what are your first impressions, Eric?”

“Well, at first, I was wondering how a place that looked so benign could be so threatening. And then, well, I was shown.”

He went on to describe the vortex of dark energy he’d been shown.

Again, silently, they thought about what he’d seen.

Thomas sighed. “Well, shall we take the tour?”

They all nodded. Thomas unlocked the door and one by one, the men filed into the house. Thomas turned on the lights in the front room.

To them, the atmosphere felt heavy, thick, but not that much different, and maybe they only felt that way because of what Eric said he’d seen, a kind of placebo effect. They stood in the front room and simply listened.

There were no tools or nails or debris lying all around on the floor like Eric

expected after what he'd seen. It looked normal. A building under construction. Several five gallon buckets of paint sat in one corner. A few ladders were lying on their sides and leaning against the wall under the front window.

"Impressions?" Eric asked.

"Heavy," Ces said.

They all nodded.

"Okay, Thomas, will you show us around? Tell us some history as we come to each area."

Thomas nodded. "Let's start upstairs and work our way down."

He turned on lights as they all followed him up the stairs to the second floor and then up a shorter flight of stairs to the large, dusty attic, where they stood quietly for a few minutes.

"The very first time we toured the house, Lily was up here with Justice and was pushed down the stairs by an unseen force. We should've known then that it was not just a fluke. They targeted her. She's a very bright light."

They all nodded. Thomas sighed. "This attic was used as a small apartment for employees when the home was a general store. There was an outside metal stair case that led to that small door right there." He pointed to a door along the back wall of the house. "It used to be a window. I guess they didn't want the help going through the second level where the owners of the store lived."

"How did you find out about this?"

"Mrs. Epps, the town librarian and historian is a wealth of knowledge. I encouraged her to write a few books about Pine Forest, and I believe she is working on that. She's quite the character."

The men smiled.

"When Knox's family lived here, the two younger boys slept up here once they were no longer toddlers. They died during the yellow fever epidemic that swept through Georgia."

"The epidemic that killed the baby and the young girl?" Alo asked.

"No. The baby and the young girl were the first to die and they died of yellow fever, but that was years before the widespread epidemic hit."

Thomas sighed. "When the oldest four sons sold the house, it was to a banker who operated across the street and a block up where the old bank building was located. They didn't live here long. They sold the place to the town and it sat empty for years. Then James Kotten came in, paid the back taxes and the house was his. He opened the general store. He employed a homeless man and his teen son who lived up here. James Kotten and his wife and three kids lived on the second floor." Thomas nodded. "Let's head down there."

They all followed him down to the second floor.

"This front bedroom was occupied by the Kotten's eldest child. A girl. Before they moved here, she'd been a happy, healthy young lady. She began to have suicidal thoughts."

"Which of the Sawyer children occupied this room?"

Thomas nodded and smiled. “You’re on the right track. When the first deaths occurred, Catherine the eldest daughter, who was sixteen at the time, and Sara, who was thirteen, occupied this room. Sara was fourteen when her mother passed away. She and Catherine worked hard trying to take care of the family for three years while Knox laid around drowning his sorrows. It was Sara at age seventeen, who fell in love with a local boy. He asked her to marry him, but Knox would not allow the marriage and she went out to Pine Mountain and jumped off a two hundred foot high ridge.”

Sakchai spoke up. “And so, would you say that the demons are targeting whomever is in this room?”

Eric shook his head. “I don’t think that’s it. They go after whoever is the most vulnerable, the weakest link so to speak, and teenaged girls, with their fragile hearts and emotions are extremely vulnerable.”

The others nodded.

Thomas pointed toward the window. “Lily stood at this window and talked about jumping. She said she felt like someone was whispering to her, telling her to jump, to end all the pain.”

“Well, now, that’s disturbing,” Lev said.

They all nodded again and followed Thomas as he moved on to the second room, which was now a bathroom, or would be when it was all finished. “This used to be the second bedroom. It was occupied by seven-year-old Lucy and eleven-year-old Nancy.”

“And it was Lucy who passed away the same time as baby Jane, right?” Ronny asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“I can feel the sadness.”

“Let go of that, Ronny,” Eric said quickly. “They want you to feel that.”

Ronny nodded. “Yes, I have to be stronger.”

“I think we all do,” Billy said. “Because I was feelin’ that overwhelming sadness myself.”

They moved through the bathroom to a large closet and dressing room. “This used to be another bedroom. It was Franklin’s and Harry’s room, ages, fifteen and fourteen. They were two of the oldest four boys who survived.”

“And where did they end up going?” Ricky asked.

“Harry made his home in Mississippi, and Franklin ended up in Tennessee and is the ancestor of Miss Heather Tanner’s fiancé, Nolan Sawyer, which I think is very cool and when I get time, I will go visit them and also seek out the other two brothers.”

“That should be fun,” Ricky said.

Thomas nodded. “I’m very much looking forward to it. We just need to take care of this business.”

They moved on to the last room at the back of the house. “And this was Walter’s and Delton’s room. They were pretty much grown when baby Jane passed away. Ages, eighteen and twenty.”

“And Delton is your ancestor,” Miguel stated.

Thomas nodded. “Yes. He settled in Kansas. And Walter settled in Alabama.”

"Do you think it's odd that these four brothers, who'd been through such a tragedy together, would go their separate ways and never communicate with each other again?" Andrew Musani asked.

Thomas nodded. "It might seem odd to us, in this day and age, but I imagine communication was difficult back then. Also, about ten years later after they left and split up, the American civil war happened. Three of the brothers were in a southern state. Most Kansas men fought for the Union army, so, if they were involved, it may have been a factor that kept them separated. I'm thinking there are probably more journals up in that attic that I need to look into, but this mission took precedence."

"Well, when you find those journals, I'd be very interested in learning more about your marvelous family," Alo said.

Thomas nodded. "I will be honored to share them with you." He stopped and looked around. "May I simply tell you all right now, how very honored I am that you would make this long trip here, that you would have such love in your hearts that you would take this time to come and help with this problem. I am so very grateful to you."

"There's no need for gratitude to us," Henrik said. "I think all of us here would agree, that we are doing what God has called us to do. We are happy, eager, even excited to see what God will ask us to do in this situation. We are being schooled. Honed. Made ready, and there's no way anyone could make me leave now. We're here to the end."

They all agreed with what Henrik said and continued on the tour, moving back down to the first level and Thomas headed to the rear of the house.

"This little room here, was the baby's room, so it could be right here next to where Knox and Birdie slept." He swept his arm around. "This area will now be storage and a walk-in cooler and a freezer." He walked up a few steps and obviously this is the kitchen, where hopefully, our sweet Lily will recover and cook up amazing meals for all of her customers."

Each man said a quick silent prayer that it would be so.

They moved back to the front room that would be the dining room.

The fireplace on the far north wall was now fringed by beautiful glass and wood double doors that led out to a giant side deck. It was lovely.

They stood in a circle around the large room, each man quiet in his thoughts.

Finally, Justin spoke up. "It seems so benign, so harmless right now."

The men nodded.

Eric shook his head. "Well, it's not. They're hiding. They're watching and waiting to see what we'll do. They're looking for a weakness to exploit. They won't find one," he said firmly.

There was a loud bang as something in the kitchen area toppled over.

Ricky headed in to see what it was.

"A piece of PVC pipe rolled off the counter."

The men smiled, their warrior instincts stirring in their hearts.

"I know that makes you want to defy them. And we will," Eric said calmly. "On our own terms. For now, what say we have a prayer?"

They all smiled and nodded. They were on the battlefield, taking stock, and cannot allow the enemy to see any weakness.

"As a matter of fact," Eric went on. "Each of us should pray. I'll begin and then we'll move to my right," he said, glancing at Lev.

Lev nodded with a smile.

The moment Eric began to pray, it felt like an earthquake. A small tremor. The floor began to vibrate. Alo's weaker legs started to give out and Billy and Sakchai on either side of him reached out to help steady him. Eric prayed louder, blessing the house, asking for strength.

Ronny made a short sound as he became unsteady. Lev and Ces reached out to steady him.

Eric finished his prayer and they all looked around.

"Well now," Billy proclaimed. "That was interesting."

"Indeed," Ronny said.

"And we're just getting started," Eric reminded them. "Go ahead Lev."

They all stood closer together and bowed their heads.

✝✝✝

Still January 29th...

Gabe walked along the path from the Inn to his family home. A path he'd walked probably thousands of times over his eighteen years, the first times probably holding his mom's hand, or father's, or one of his sister's. Perhaps they'd let him run along in front of them on his little legs. Tonight, he walked with determined purpose.

He and his "brothers" left the *Children's Hospital* in the ATL and went to see Lily at *Pine Forest Memorial*. He'd barely finished crying over saying goodbye to Iris when he realized he may have to say goodbye to Lily as well. She'd looked so vulnerable. He thought of her bossing him around in the kitchen. He'd give anything to have her do that again. And poor Justice. Gabe's heart went out to him too, because he knew how he'd feel if suddenly Taylor was taken from him. And poor Daisy. Lily and Daisy were like an extension of each other and she looked totally lost. Thank goodness Brody had called to check on her and was doing his best to give her the support she needed.

Now, Gabe was headed home to check on his father. He'd been told he'd gone home to gather some things for his mom and then he'd be at the Inn for the meeting. But he wasn't there and he wasn't answering his phone, so Gabe said he'd run home to check on him. His bros tried to come with him, but they traveled all day and then followed him around all over Atlanta. He told them to rest. His house was a minute away. Thirty seconds if he ran.

He got to the house and it was completely dark. That was disturbing. Still, his father's car was in the drive. He headed in. "Dad?"

There was no answer. "Daaad?" he called louder.

No answer.

Gabe trotted upstairs to see if he was up in his room. Maybe he was praying, but there was no one upstairs. Gabe couldn't help it, he stopped in at Iris' room. Immediately his eyes welled with tears. Her bed was not made, her little pink and purple

quilt was halfway in the floor. He could see himself pull the covers up under her chin and tell her to go to sleep and she'd giggle and push them way down and they'd go back and forth until he'd lie down next to her and promise to stay until she fell asleep. Sniffing, he shook his head and blew out a breath. This cross was so very heavy.

He searched the rest of the house, stopping in his father's office. He sat at the desk to see if he'd been working on anything. Nothing. Then he glanced up at the monitors when he saw motion. He rose. His father was walking in the back yard. Gabe watched as his dad stopped, and then dropped to his knees, his head bent. Gabe thought his heart would break. He'd never seen his father so filled with despair and anguish. At first he thought he shouldn't go to him. Let him work this out on his own. But the phrase kept repeating in his head. 'Go to him. Go to him.' Gabe rose and headed out the back family room door.

He approached him slowly, not trying to be quiet, so that his dad wouldn't turn and draw on him. He could hear his father's hitched breathing and knew he was crying. Slowly, Gabe knelt down beside him and put his arm around his father's shoulders. "Dad," Gabe said softly.

Keegan drew a deep breath and tried to get himself under control. He wiped his face with his hands and then wiped his hands on his pant legs.

"Son," he said softly.

"Dad, what can I do to help?"

"Just be here," he said quietly.

Gabe stayed right there, tightening his hold on his father.

Keegan sniffed and blew out a breath. Drew another deep breath and blew it out again. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, Dad. I'm feelin' ya."

Keegan nodded. "I feel so useless. There's nothing I can do. I can't fight this. I can't shoot it. I can't beat it up."

Gabe nodded. "I feel the same. It reminds me of something Grandmaster Kino told me. He said when his first wife was dying of cancer, he was mad, not at God, but at himself, because he felt so helpless and so useless. He could fight, but he couldn't fight the cancer for his wife. All he could do was stand by and watch her gradually slip away."

Keegan thought about that for while. "I've heard people say stuff like that before, but I guess I never really understood until now. I want to save them. Sweet Lily, so happy to find the love of her life. So excited about sharing time with him. And little Iris, my sweet baby girl." He stopped as he choked on the words. He cleared his throat. "I should be able to save them. I'm their father. Their protector. It feels like I've failed them."

"No, Dad. You've loved them and taken care of them and taught them. You haven't failed them. This is out of your control."

Keegan nodded. "I know that logically. But it's killing me."

Gabe thought and prayed. *What can I say, Father? How can I help my dad? I don't know how to help.*

A question came to his mind, so he asked it. “Dad, back last August when Grandmaster Kino was essentially brain dead, and I was dying. How did you handle it?”

Keegan was quiet as he thought. “I, well, I suppose I spoke with your mom and your sisters and we talked about you would be in the arms of Jesus and we talked about who were we to ask God to change His plan for us. We decided as a family that we would accept that heavy burden and live in a way that would please Him, and do our best to continue your legacy. But this feels different than that.”

“How?” Gabe asked. “Because it’s two of us instead of just one?”

“No, I don’t think that’s it. I think it’s because Lily and Iris are females. If you left us, it was because you were a warrior. You were leaving as a warrior. You were killed on the battlefield of life. We almost expect that of men. But the girls, they’re just innocent girls. They’re not warriors. They’re nurturers. Sweet, loving, kind, filled with light. We are supposed to protect them. Shield them.”

Gabe sighed. “I get that, Dad, for sure. I get it. I feel the same way.”

“And now, here I am, showing my weakness to my own son. I’ve been out here, praying, begging God to heal my girls. Our girls. Begging Him to talk to me. To help me. To give me peace. To keep me from falling apart so that I can help my family through this, but I can’t hear Him. He is silent. Usually, I can feel what He wants me to do. But I got nothin’.”

Gabe drew a deep breath and nodded as words flowed into his brain.

“A man venting to his son shows he trusts his son. It shows he knows his son is ready to take on the responsibility of being a man. It’s not a weakness. It’s a brotherhood. God may be silent, but He *is* listening. When He is silent, that doesn’t mean that He is still. He is allowing you and I to come to terms with what is happening. He is asking you and I to trust Him completely. Fully trust Him. Letting go of what we want, which He knows is a difficult thing to do. He *is* working. We don’t yet know or understand what is taking place. We must learn in steps. He is not still. He is working. He hears you. He sees you. He loves you and He is proud of you. He says, ‘Well done, Keegan Tanner.”

Keegan slowly turned his head to look at Gabe because of the way his voice changed. It became firm, deeper, louder, and when he looked, Gabe’s face was glowing with light.

Gabe shook his head. “Wow, Dad, I just felt the Holy Spirit so strong as God had me speak those words.”

Keegan smiled. “Do you remember what you said?”

“Of course. I didn’t like, black out or something.”

Keegan nodded and sighed. “Father,” he began. “I will try very hard to let go and be strong for my family.”

Gabe nodded. “Good. Go to the meeting. They’re waiting for us. ”

“Go to the meeting? Did God just tell you that?”

Gabe smiled. “Yep. His words in my brain were, ‘Good, go to the meeting. They’re waiting.” He grinned. “Cool. It’s like we’re having a face to face with God. So, like, Father, can we keep going? Cuz, like, I have a million questions.”

They both waited and then they're eyes met. Silence. They both chuckled. "Guess that's a 'no'," Keegan said.

Gabe nodded. "Guess so."

✝✝✝

Ezekiel 2:1-2

"He said to me, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you."As he spoke, the Spirit came into me and raised me to my feet, and I heard him speaking to me."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Still January 29th...

Eric Kino looked around the large table. The Inn was full, with these people. Jason and Justin. Ricky and young Eric. Mark, Joey, JoJo and Logan. Jeff Davis, John Appel, and Chaz Stewart. Billy Wallace, Henrik Johansen, Sakchai Chen, Andrew Musani, Miguel Alvarez, Lev Vasilyev, Ronny Clark, Alo Quinn, Ces Iman, Thomas Sawyer, Cam Wallace, Jeffy, Justice Sawyer and himself. They were waiting on Keegan and Gabe whom Jeffy said were working a few things out and would be here shortly. There were no snacks being served as everyone was fasting and it was almost midnight anyway.

Jodi Appel and Hannah Brown were busy taking care of Isaiah, Gentian and Eli back in Jodi's bedroom.

The Inn door opened and Gabe and Keegan finally walked in and headed straight to the dining room.

Eric stood. "Keegan, Gabe, come in, come in. Welcome."

"Thank you Grandmaster Kino," Keegan said. "Sorry for the delay. Having a bit of a rough time."

Eric nodded. "Please don't apologize. We totally understand. We're here to help. It's not gonna be easy, but we are all warriors and I know we have God on our side."

Keegan and Gabe went around shaking everyone's hands and then took a seat.

Eric smiled at everyone. "What an amazing group the Lord has assembled. We have a lot to cover, so let's begin with prayer. Thomas, would you honor us?"

After an eloquent prayer, Eric began by telling them what God showed him when they went to the house earlier. After that, he asked Jeffy to fill them in on Iris' and Lily's conditions. Thomas and Justice then went on to explain all they'd found about Knox and the house.

"And so," Grandmaster Kino, went on, "you can see why we are connecting whatever is occupying the house with Iris' and Lily's conditions. They are blatant attacks and we must stop them."

"Then you don't think it's too late?" Gabe asked.

Eric smiled and shrugged. "It wasn't too late when I was pronounced brain dead, was it?"

Gabe nodded. "I'm almost afraid to hope."

"Never be afraid to hope," Andrew said softly. "I thought I would be in prison for the rest of my life and here I am, out, free, and sitting comfortably in a beautiful home on the other side of the world. The good Lord can make a way."

Gabe smiled at the man. "I can't wait to hear your story." He looked around. "To hear all of your stories."

They all nodded and smiled.

Eric smiled. “Before we go any further, I am going to turn the time over to Jeffy. The Lord has disclosed to her who the twelfth man is. She says it comes with a story, and so she will tell that now and then we’ll talk about the plan to storm the castle, so to speak. I’m guessing the Lord will give us time to go and collect the twelfth man.”

All eyes turned to Jeffy. She rose. “The story I have to tell is a sad one, for sure, but it has a happy ending. It begins all the way across the Atlantic to Greenland.”

They all nodded.

Jeffy smiled. “Once upon a time, in Greenland, in 1953, the Inuit village of Qaanaaq [ka’-uh-nak] in Greenland was established. It used to be the village of Uummannaq [oo-mahn-nok]. This new village was established when the residents of the settlements of Uummannaq were relocated to make way for the expansion of a US air base; at Thule. In this village was a beautiful Inuit girl named, Aguta. Her name meant “gatherer of the dead”. Her parents were very old. They’d tried to have a child for many years and were finally blessed with this girl. She was very popular in the Kalaallit [Ka-la-ah-lit] community which is the Inuit of Greenland. Many boys wanted to marry Aguta but she was promised at birth to a a boy before she was born, as was the custom.

As they grew, because she was so beautiful, the boy, his name was Hanta, which means hunter, he often bragged at his luck. As Hanta became a young man, he was haughty and arrogant and Aguta didn’t like him. She was rebellious and told her parents she did not want to marry him. Then one day, she met a young man who was not Inuit. He was a man from a place called America. He was in Greenland to help build a United States Air base.”

Thomas, Justice and Keegan all thought that was a strange coincidence but they remained silent. Keegan had just talked about his grandfather recently and he’d been working on that very air base.

“The beautiful Aguta fell in love very quickly with the American. Marriage with the Inuit was not a big celebrated thing. For many, they simply began living together, and when they had a baby, they were considered married. So, it was not a bad thing, in Aguta’s mind, when she seduced the young American. She thought, if she was impregnated by someone other than Hanta, she wouldn’t have to marry him. It was only once she became pregnant with a white man’s child that she realized she could not tell anyone who her lover was. He was not Inuit and he would eventually be leaving and going back to America. Though she loved him, in her own way, she had no desire to leave her parents and her village and her way of life. But you see, that was fear talking. That was the enemy in her head, working hard to keep her from walking the path created for her.”

Jeffy stopped, offering a sad smile. “That was the plan. God’s plan was for Aguta and her American sweetheart to fall in love, and she would go back to America with him, they would have the child and he would grow strong and bold in God and be our number twelve.

“However, Aguta’s goal had simply been to get pregnant so that she could tell Hanta that she didn’t belong to him anymore, and she accomplished that goal. She

stopped coming to the base to see her lover for fear he would find out she was pregnant, and want his child and possibly take the child from her when she refused to leave her village.

"However, when she stopped coming to the air base, he missed her terribly and went looking for her, but the Inuit were a very closed people. They denied knowing her and kindly sent him away. He was distressed for awhile and finally gave up. Not long after, he met a nurse there, on the base, fell in love with her, married her and she gave birth to a son. They lived there on base a few more years.

"It could have been a 'happy ever after,' but right near the end of his active service duty, he overheard some guys at the bar, drunk and talking loudly and teasing each other about a beautiful Inuit girl who'd given birth to a white man's child. He didn't think much about it until he heard one of the men say her name was Aguta. Deciding he had to know if he had a child, he told his wife about the short affair he'd had with the girl. He felt driven to go and find her and see if the child was his. His wife was a good woman; kind, understanding, strong and wise. She told him to go and see, and be careful and hurry back.

"He went to the village of Qaanaaq and once again inquired about Aguta. This time he was met with stony silence. Frustrated, he started back to the air base when an old woman approached him. "Come with me," she said in very broken English. "I will show you what happened to Aguta."

"She led him away from the village, through an icy pass to the edge of a high cliff. There was a cave there and he followed her into the cave. There in the cave, as if sitting against the wall, was the body of Aguta. On her lap was the body of a baby, wrapped in blankets. Of course, the man was aghast. 'What happened to her?' he asked.

"The old woman told him she was killed by her husband when he found she had another man's child. A white man's child. A son. So, as you can imagine," Jeffy went on, "the man was very distraught. He confessed to the old woman that he hadn't known that Aguta was married and that he loved her and it was his child. The woman nodded and explained that Aguta was her daughter and about their custom to marry their children, sometimes even before they were born. This angered him. He told her, with much disdain, what a despicable thing he thought that was to do, to take away her freewill to choose her own mate. The old woman explained to him that he didn't understand and shouldn't judge their culture. But the man was angry and told her that wrong was wrong and that the husband would answer to God for the death of his beautiful Aguta and his son."

Jeffy stopped and shook her head. "He walked out of that cave and was surprised to find a man, waiting for him. It was Hanta. Hanta confronted him and told him he was Aguta's husband. The American was enraged for Hanta had not only murdered Aguta, but his child. He grabbed him and told him he would bring him back to the base and he would be charged with murder. But he never got the chance. Hanta merely pushed the man backward and he tumbled off the edge of the cliff to his death. He was never heard from again. The Air Force sent out a search party to look for the man, but he was never found."

Jeffy stopped and sighed. “That child, would have been the twelfth man.” She looked at Keegan. “And that man, Mr. Tanner, Aguta’s American lover, his name was Dennis Tanner, the grandfather that you never knew. His wife’s name was Helen Tanner who alone and bereaved, stalwartly raised their child. She took him first to Missouri, where a friend helped her get settled. Their son’s name was Roger Tanner, your father. They named him Roger because, as you know, that is the word in the military meaning ‘message received and understood,’ and the Air Force pilots used it often. So, it was a nod to your father’s beginnings. Then Roger grew up and married Deborah Hunt and moved to Tennessee.”

Both Gabe and Keegan sat stunned. There was silence for a few minutes as Keegan and Gabe digested the information. Then Eric asked the obvious question. “So, Jeffy, if the twelfth man is dead, who will take his place?”

She nodded and smiled. “Like the rest of you, the bloodline is important. Your DNA is important.” She glanced at the Tanner men. “But it’s not the only important thing. It must be someone who’s been close to God, who has lived close to God most of his life. Someone who is honest, and strong, who has kept himself clean from sexual immorality and...”

“Well that lets me out,” Keegan said quickly. “You all know my history. I was wild and promiscuous.”

Jeffy nodded. “You, Mr. Tanner, are a noble and true warrior of God. Tough and seasoned. You weren’t really taught about God and yet you stumbled through and found your way and our Father is very pleased with you. He’s pleased that you came around and raised up a son who fits the profile, who *is* innocent, and strong, and honest, and noble and has been close to God all of his life.”

All eyes shifted to Gabe.

His eyes opened wide. “Me? No way. I’m only eighteen. I’m just a dumb kid. And I’m not innocent.”

When they all looked at him quietly, he lowered his head. “What I mean is, I have thoughts that are not innocent.” He glanced at Taylor’s dad and then at his own father.

“Stop Gabe,” young Eric said. “My brother, you are the only logical choice. It seems so obvious now.”

Gabe shook his head.

“Bro,” JoJo began. “Really, it does seem obvious. Yes, you’re younger, I mean, a whole lot younger, but you’re strong, and you’re wise beyond your years and we all look up to you and admire you.”

“I’m not worthy,” Gabe persisted.

“You are so worthy, brother,” Logan said. “Young Eric, JoJo and I are all older than you, but we look up to you, Gabe. We are in awe of you.”

“Stop.”

JoJo spoke again. “No. Listen Gabe, uh, well, actually, don’t listen to me, but listen to these men, all of these men. I mean, if they are in agreement, if they can think of no reason to exclude you, then you simply must accept this calling. What an honor. It’s perfect, Gabe. It’s so right.”

Ronny, the second oldest cleared his throat. “Young man, Gabriel, what JoJo just said isn’t exactly right, because it isn’t up to us to agree or not. We do not second guess God’s will and He has called you. He has actually called you many times and you have answered the call each time. Will you deny God?”

Gabe grimaced and looked up at Grandmaster Kino. “But sir, I don’t feel worthy to stand with you eleven mighty men.”

Eric sighed and nodded. “First, your humility is noted. Notwithstanding, if that feeling of unworthiness persists, then that, young sir, is the enemy talking, just like the enemy instilled fear into Aguta.” He looked at Keegan. “Your father has just been commended for his raising of a fine young man of God. Will you deny your father that honor?”

Gabe sighed. “No, no, of course not.”

“Then the only way to honor the good works your father has done, is to accept the calling. Though I warn you, it will be difficult.”

“I’m not afraid of the difficulty,” Gabe said softly.

“Then what are you afraid of, young man?” Ces asked.

Gabe sighed. “Um, well, I guess of disappointing you, all of you. The weight feels heavy.”

“Indeed it is heavy,” Alo said. “Will you help us fight for your sisters?”

Gabe blinked. “That’s really what I’d be doing, right? And the answer to that is easy, because, of course I’ll fight for my sisters. I’d give my life for them.”

Keegan would have smiled at that, if he too wasn’t feeling the weight his son was going to have to carry. He was also feeling the weight of regret. If he’d been more worthy, maybe he would have been able to shoulder this responsibility.

Jeffy smiled at him. “Mr. Tanner, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to intrude on your thoughts, but things turned out exactly like they were suppose to turn out. God’s timing is perfect. God’s plan is perfect. Your father taught you what he knew, strength and honor and boldness and endurance. My brother brought you into the fold. You taught Gabe and raised him to be a most amazing young man, and now, maybe he, along with these others, can defeat the enemy.”

“But God’s plan was to have my grandfather’s first son be part of the twelve,” Keegan returned. “I’m not trying to cause trouble, but I don’t really understand.”

Eric nodded. “Everyone has freewill. Evil interfered with God’s good plan. When that happens, He always works around it.”

Billy Wallace nodded. “Perhaps God knew evil would interfere. I would say that He *did* know. Perhaps it’s going down just the way it was meant to go down.”

Miguel smiled. “Yes, and, maybe it happened this way because we were meant to witness such a beautiful thing as to see Jesus make a way. He always makes a way.”

Lev smiled at his good friend. “He does indeed.”

Eric smiled. “Gabe? Will you officially accept the call?”

Gabe stood and bowed. “Yes sir, I *will* accept and I *will* do my best.”

The entire group rose and bowed and were blessed with being filled with the Holy Spirit.

"Jeffy?" Eric said. "Do you have anything else?"

She shook her head. "Not currently. I turn it over to you, Daddy."

He chuckled. She always called him 'Daddy' as she switched gears from doctor or seer back to his little girl.

Eric drew a deep breath. "I don't want to wait very long. Iris and Lily are hanging by a thread. So, I would ask if you will all get some rest, awake refreshed, pick up our Bibles and head over to the house tomorrow just before noon. Once we're there, we'll begin with prayer and scripture, so pick some good ones. Outside the house today, God spoke to me and told me that what we have to do is on a need to know basis. We won't know what to do until we are there, inside the house. But I do know this; I need containment outside the house. I'm hoping to have you, Keegan, John, Chaz and Jeff, the power of friendship, one of you on each side of the house. The goal, no demon shall leave the house. And none shall enter. Just like in the *Lord of the Rings* movie, 'they– shall– not– pass'."

The men all smiled.

Eric nodded. "Lizzy will have Heather and Nolan and Rose and Jericho with her to guard Iris. Lily will have Violet and CJ and Cam and Daisy, and of course Jeffy will be with her too. I'm sorry, but I need everyone else here. Justice, that includes you."

They all nodded.

"We'll be here," Keegan and John said at the same time. Keegan cleared his throat. "But tonight, I have to bring Lizzy another cooler for the milk for the babies, and some overnight things that she needs."

Eric shook his head. "It's midnight, Keegan and you need to rest. I need you at your best. Would you mind if I sent them by courier?"

Keegan sighed. He wanted, needed to hold his wife and daughter. Oh well, hopefully, what he was doing would allow that to happen for many years. He nodded. "Yes. That will be fine."

"Eric," John said. "I'll arrange it."

"Uh, John," Thomas said. "My driver, Curtis, he knows Lizzy and will be happy to help her in some way. Let him take care of it, and he can pick up the milk she has now and bring it back."

John nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Sawyer."

Eric looked around the group. "Let me warn you about something else I've seen. I'm speaking to Keegan, John, Chaz and Jeff, again. There may be attacks from people, I mean, real people with demons attached, who try to approach you and get inside the house to stop us. So, wear vests. Come fully ready to do battle, both spiritual and physical. Jason, Joey, set up communication just like when you guys are working on a mission."

Both Jason and Joey nodded.

"Eric," John Appel said. "If there is fighting on the outside, fighting against real people, it will attract the police, who are only a block away. Maybe we should bring them in on this, not on all that's taking place, but let them help arrest and detain any human who comes to battle us."

Eric nodded as he looked at John and Chaz and Keegan. "You guys know what's best here in this town. I'll leave it to your discretion."

John nodded at Chaz.

"I'll talk to my brother," Chaz offered.

"Good, thank you, Chaz, and thank you for your input, John," Eric said. "For the benefit of everyone else who doesn't know, Chaz' brother is the Sheriff of Pine County and a fine man." He took a moment to breathe and allowed a slight smile. "Okay, so, get ready people, men, my friends and family. Put on the full armor of God. We cannot fail. We will not fail."

Thomas Sawyer nodded. "And again, thank you again, everyone. My gratitude knows no bounds."

"No need for thanks," several of them said at the same time.

Eric smiled. "On that note, let's get some rest."

✝✝✝

Still January 29th...8:45 PM Wednesday Night

Crystal Cove, California

Shelley glanced around the room at Melody Keith, and Anna Wallace, Hazel Iman and Dani Quinn and her two daughters, Raylynn and Kaylee. Also present was Agent Bentley Trout. He'd been tasked with watching over the Kino household while the men were gone and checking in with the agents who were with the other households.

Currently, the five Kino children were asleep up in their room. All the women who'd been left behind had briefly entertained the idea of all of them gathering together in one house, but when you add in the kids, there was just too many people. Therefore, Bree, Taylor, Amari and Brittney were at their own home, with Agent Wyatt, watching over them.

Mark's wife Bella and Em, had Ryder in the home with them and Agent Brown on call. Breez stayed at her own home with her three kiddos and Agent Winston was there with them. She also had the Okellos.

At the Davis home, Mickey, baby Scarlett, Daniel, Jeremy, Zoe and Brook had Agent Shelton with them.

Justin's wife Lori decided to stay with Angel and so did Kimmie with baby Jay and her husband, Jensen, who had been pulled from an assignment to watch over the Lee family.

Because Jordan had practice and classes, she stayed at the apartment and was pleased to continue to have Agent Kim watching over her.

Shelley smiled at the people remaining as the Zoom call was coming to an end. They'd all Zoomed in and Taylor had Gabe's website piggyback on the call and so there were hundreds of thousands of people who were now offering prayers for the sisters of Gabe Tanner and over the men who went to Georgia to help them. They waited for Taylor to sign off from the website and then Shelley finally spoke to everyone who remained on the family Zoom call.

"Well, everyone, that was lovely," Shelley said. "Those were some beautiful and heartfelt prayers.

Taylor sniffed. “Grandma, I’m trying to think positive but I’m so worried. I mean, Gabe loves his sisters so much. He’s like, crazy in love with little Iris, and actually I am too. I can’t imagine life without her.”

“Me too,” Jordan put in. “And Lily, she is just the nicest person in the world. When we were out there at the *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, she was so kind to me. We talked several times and she said if we didn’t live on opposites sides of the country, we’d be best friends. She’s just so nice.”

“She really is,” Taylor agreed. “And she’s also so talented. I mean, not only is she an amazing chef, but she can sing like her mom.”

“Okay, ladies,” Bree said. “You’re talking about her as if she’s already gone. Let’s not give up hope so quickly.”

“Has anyone heard from any of the guys?” Breez asked.

Mickey nodded. “Jeff called me a little while ago. He said they’ve been going non-stop since they arrived there and they were about to have a big meeting at the Inn. They were waiting on Keegan and Gabe to arrive. He said the atmosphere there was thick and ominous and emotions were running heavy. He also said that Keegan was barely holding it together.”

“Bless his heart,” Shelley mumbled.

“Oh, please, dear Lord,” Bella suddenly said. “Please help them to be strong and rise up and defeat this evil.”

The ladies all nodded.

“I wish we could do something to help them,” Anna Wallace said.

Shelley smiled at her. Slowly but surely, the woman who’d seemed so selfish and narcissistic was coming around, thinking of others and the transformation was a beautiful thing.

“Well,” Shelley said. “We *can* do something. We can keep praying. We can take care of our children and homes while the men are away. My house needs a good cleaning to prepare for the mens’ victorious return. And I’m gonna text some encouraging scriptures and thoughts to Eric.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Bella said.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Dani Quinn said.

“I agree,” Raylynn said. “JoJo needs to know that I’m with him in spirit and praying for him and all the others.”

Melody smiled. “Yes, let’s do this. And I think I’m gonna record myself reading some scriptures. Logan likes to hear my voice.”

“Good idea, Mel,” Jordan said. “Tay? Are you in?”

“Yes, I’m in.”

“Good,” Shelley said decisively. “Let’s get to work.”

✝✝✝

January 30, Early Thursday Morning

Children’s Hospital, Atlanta, Georgia

Lizzy Tanner sniffed as she spoke on the phone. “No, Lisa, I completely understand. I’m so sorry.”

Lisa and Jodi sat in Jodi's bedroom at the Inn, talking with their sweet friend who was sounding more and more desperate.

"Lizzy girl, why are you apologizing? You can't help that you're a little bit stressed. Who wouldn't be? It's okay. Let's just be thankful that I can do this for you. And I'm glad to do it for you. I just called to tell you what was going on so you could know that you don't have to worry about them. We're taking very good care of your sweet babies. And you and I have pretty much the same diet, so, just go ahead and pump for your own comfort and to keep the supply going, but just throw it away. I've got you, girl."

Lizzy sniffed again and wiped at her eyes. "Thank you, Lisa. And you, Jodi. And tell Hannah and Melaynah, and well, just all of you."

"It's the very least we can do," Jodi added. "Now you just concentrate on our little Iris and Lily getting well."

"Jodi," Lizzy whispered. "Lisa— I don't want to say this, but I need to tell someone this."

"Go ahead, Liz, we got you," Lisa said.

"I, I don't feel like Iris is gonna get well. I prayed all night by her bed and I don't have that peaceful feeling I get when I know everything is gonna be okay. I think we're gonna lose her. And I keep trying to tell myself, that she'll be with Jesus. It's okay. But oooh, I'm really struggling. And I can't tell Keegan because I know he's having a hard time too. I just hope that if it happens, I can somehow be strong enough to help my family through this. I don't want anyone to get bitter and turn away from God."

"Oh, sweet lady," Jodi said. "You're family will not turn from God. You've taught them well. They understand God has a plan. They'll hurt for awhile. But they'll get stronger. They won't fall away."

"How do you know?" Lizzy whispered.

"Because I know you and your husband. Because I see how your girls act and I see your son rising up. It's gonna be hard, but you will all make it through this hard time. God is with you, Lizzy. He's just quiet while you work your way through these feelings."

Lizzy sniffed again. "Remember when I first got pregnant with Iris? We all went to California to stay with the Kinos and Keegan and the guys all went to Kazakstan. I'd been so afraid that something would happen to Keegan and he wouldn't be here for her birth. But finally, he was here. Finally I had a baby and her father was right there to see her born. It was amazing. It was the happiest day. Just the best."

"I remember," Lisa said. "It was an awesome day."

"And now, the first one that he saw born is leaving us," she cried.

"Deep breath, Lizzy," Jodi said. "Let's not jump to conclusions. Jesus sees your family. He's worked miracles in your life before. Who's to say He won't do it again."

"You're right. You're right. I'm sorry. I'm kinda losin' it. I'm just so tired. But don't tell Keegan. He's under enough pressure and I don't want him to come running up here for me instead of doing what he needs to do."

"Your secrets are always safe with us," Lisa said.

"Always," Jodi agreed.

"Oh!" Lizzy said with a gasp. "Rose just came out and said Iris is awake and asking for me. Gotta go."

"Take care, Lizzy girl. Chin up."

"Thanks, y'all. Bye."

Jodi and Lisa sighed as they ended the call.

"Jodi," Lisa said. "I think one of us should be up there with her. I know she has Rose and Heather, but I think she needs one of us."

Jodi nodded. "I agree, and you have the babies so, I'll get ready and head up there." She started out of the room. "I'm gonna make sure the guys are taken care of and then I'll come back to get ready. You just relax and keep nursing and Hannah and I will get all the baby stuff together for you to take with you when you head back home."

Jodi hurried out and smiled at John as he came down the hall.

"Did you get it all settled?" John asked.

"Yes," Jodi answered. "I told Lizzy what Jeffy said, that the cortisol in Lizzy's milk is probably why the babies are being so fussy and refusing to eat. So, she's okay with Lisa nursing them for her."

"Good. Just one less thing for her to worry about right now."

Jodi nodded her head. "She's having a really hard time, but she doesn't want us to tell Keegan, but I'm telling you, because you're my husband, but don't break her confidence."

John frowned. "I'm glad you want to tell me, and I won't break your or her confidence, unless it feels necessary," he warned.

Jodi nodded. "Understood. John, she says she feels like Iris isn't gonna make it and she's worried sick that her family might fall apart and turn away from God."

John shook his head. "No way will that happen. We won't let it."

Jodi smiled at her strong husband. He was always such a rock.

He smiled at her and took her hand. "The kitchen staff is starting on breakfast. Will you and Lisa be able to join us, or should we have them put two plates away for you?"

"No, we'll be out before breakfast is ready. Let me just get Lisa situated. Then after she nurses the babies, we've decided that she's gonna take them over to her house. Lisa wants Hannah to stay with her too so that she and Melaynah can help with the four babies and she thinks Lizzy needs me, so, I'm gonna drive up to Atlanta to be with her."

John nodded. "Sounds good. Be careful."

"I will. I promise. What are the guys doing right now?"

"Well, in just a few minutes, Grandmaster Kino and all who want to join are gonna do his morning beach routine. You know, it prepares them physically, mentally and spiritually for each day and they feel that today, they need it more than ever."

"Are you're gonna join them? Because I love watching you do that routine with them."

John smiled. "Yes, I've been invited to join them, and, well, you know what they always say."

Jodi nodded and put on a stern face. "When Grandmaster Kino invites you to join

him for a martial arts thing, you don't turn him down."

"Right. So, we'll do the routine, and as you know it ends in prayer, so they'll also bless the food and break their fast. We'll all eat to fuel up 'cause we're gonna need a lot of energy. Then everyone will gear up, and at 11:30 we'll head over to the house."

Jodi sighed. "So John, how are you feelin' about this?"

He offered a slight smile and nodded. "I'm ready to do battle."

Jodi smiled. "My warrior. I'm so grateful for you."

"And I, you," he said as he leaned forward and kissed her quickly.

He started toward their bedroom.

"John, where are you going?"

"I'm gonna change into my uniform to join the Kinos."

"Um, Lisa is nursing right now. Let me go get it for you and you change in the bathroom out here."

John nodded. "Yes ma'am."

✝✝✝

January 30th Thursday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Thomas and Justice Sawyer, Sakchai Chen, Miguel Alvarez, Lev Vasilyev, Ces Iman, Henrik Johansen, Andrew Musani, Ronny Clark, Alo Quinn, Billy Wallace and Chaz Stewart sat quietly on the giant front porch of the Inn as they watched a mighty group of warriors warm up to do battle. It was actually a beautiful thing to see. They all wore white and they looked like warrior angels.

As they stood out there getting ready to work together, Grandmaster Kino had untied his golden belt and hung it over the railing of the porch. They all immediately understood the gesture. What they were doing today had nothing to do with their ranking as a martial artist. One by one, each of them followed suit.

Grandmaster Kino stood in front. Slightly behind him in a line were Justin and Jason Lee, John Appel and Ricky Kino. Slightly behind them, the next line held Keegan Tanner, Jeff Davis, Cam Wallace, and Joey and Mark Adams. The third line held young Eric Kino, JoJo Adams, Logan Adams and Gabe Tanner. They'd performed a routine of stretches, all perfectly in sync. They'd then moved into the Kino special form. It consisted of the Kino special forms for each rank, performed together as one single long form.

Billy spoke softly. "I've seen them do this several times now, and it never gets old. It's riveting to watch."

"I agree," Andrew said. "It is mesmerizing."

"It's like you can feel the power there," Ronny said. "This big vortex of power coming off each of them."

Ces nodded. "Good description. A vortex of power."

Eric looked up at the audience, and decided he would distract them from their impending mission with a special demonstration, one that would also jumpstart the warriors' minds. "Circle," he commanded when they'd finished the form.

They immediately formed a circle. A few of them had surprised looks on their faces

as they wondered what they would be called upon to do next.

"Mark and Joey, take center and demonstrate left jab twice, right hook, round house, spinning hook and double side. Side by side, not as opponents he added. Do you need me to repeat?"

"No sir," they both said. The brothers both bowed to Eric, came to the center, bowed to the audience, and demonstrated the sequence flawlessly.

Eric nodded. "Ricky and Jason," he called. "The same sequence, but this time, as opponents," Eric commanded.

They too bowed, came to the center, bowed, and demonstrated the sequence, each effectively blocking what they knew was coming. Eric went on to call on two more with a different sequence side by side and two more as opponents until all except Justin Lee had performed.

Justin smiled. "I don't suppose there's anything in that black bag for me?" he quoted from *The Wizard of Oz.*

Eric smiled. "I'll take you home myself." He stepped forward. "Tai chi chuan," Eric said softly. Justin bowed to Eric and they moved forward together to the center of the circle. Their movements were completely in tandem, ultra slow, ultra precise, requiring extreme balance, focus and coordination. The demonstration was exquisite and when it finished, those spectators on the porch rose and reverently applauded. The entire group bowed to their audience.

Eric smiled. "I invite you to join us in prayer," he said softly. "If you will come and kneel in our circle."

They all came down the steps and knelt together. Jeffy, holding Eli, Jodi, Hannah holding Gentian, Lisa, holding Isaiah, and Melaynah, who'd come to help take the babies to the Stewart home, stayed on the porch and knelt together. Eric called upon Billy Wallace to pray and break the fast and bless the food. It was a beautiful way to start what would certainly turn out to be a very difficult day.

✝✝✝

January 30th 10:30 AM Thursday Morning

Pine Forest Memorial Hospital, Pine Forest, Georgia

Pastor Tim and his assistant Pastor Bryant, finished blessing and praying over Lily as Violet watched. Lily seemed to have worsened overnight. She opened her eyes and spoke every once in a while, but she was very weak. Violet thanked the pastors, blinking back her tears as she did. They both placed their hands on Violet's head and blessed her.

Out in the waiting room, the crowd had grown. Both pastors' wives had been in to see Lily. All the kitchen staff who worked at the Inn had come to see her and pray over her. Her old high school classmates, her old teachers, Mayor Bradbury and his wife Adrienne, girls she'd played ball with, and even complete strangers who followed Gabe and Taylor came by the hospital to see Lily. They'd been coming and going all morning and there was still a waiting room full of people.

Violet was very grateful for all of their support. She and Daisy were the only blood relation with Lily today. Her mom, Rose, and Heather were with Iris. Violet said goodbye to little Iris yesterday, and today her heart was breaking that she might not ever

get to see her again, not in this world, anyway. Violet had CJ with her and currently, he was out in the waiting room. Jeffy and Cam would be arriving any minute. Violet was trying very hard to be strong for her sweet sister, but watching Lily try to speak was excruciating.

She saw the pastors out and turned when she heard Lily try to speak, and rushed to her side. "Hey, sis, I'm right here." She ran her hand over her forehead and smoothed back some wisps of hair.

"Where's Mom?"

"She's with Iris."

Lily sniffed. "How's– Iris– doing?" she asked softly, taking a breath between each word.

Violet's eyes filled. "I'm not sure, Lily."

"Tell— me," Lily said, trying to sound stern.

Violet sniffed. "I don't think she's doing too well."

Lily sighed. "I wish I could see her."

"I know, sweetie, but you just worry about you getting better first."

Lily sniffed and she began to cry softly.

"Oh, baby girl," Violet said as she hugged her.

Lily sniffed. "When is Gabe coming home?"

"He's home. He came in to see you last night. Do you remember?"

Lily shook her head slowly.

"Well, he was here. He spoke to you. He prayed over you and laid hands on you. He kissed your head and cried over you and asked Jesus to please let you stay here, but if He doesn't, to please take good care of you."

Lily cried again for a few minutes, and finally choked back the tears. "I wanna see Daddy. Please, Violet, will you get Daddy?"

"He's not here, honey. He's with Gabe and the others. They're gonna get all the bad guys out of your place and they're hoping that when they do that, you and Iris are gonna get better."

Lily shook her head. "Violet?"

"Yes, sweetie."

"I love you."

Violet's eyes filled once again. "I love you too, my awesome sister."

"Violet, where's Daisy?"

"Mrs. Bagwell brought her some food and I made her go sit and eat something. But she'll be back soon."

"Good," Lily said. "Listen, I need to tell you something and I feel like I can't wait for Daisy to get back, so, could you record me?"

"Absolutely," Violet said as she pulled out her phone. She began the video herself. "It's Thursday morning, January 30th and I'm here at *Pine Forest Memorial Hospital* and Lily wants to tell us something and asked me to record her, so, here's the famous chef, Lily Tanner, go ahead Lily."

She turned the phone. Lily gasped and tried to smooth her hair. "I didn't know I

looked so bad."

"You don't look bad, Lily. You're beautiful."

Lily only sighed. "Listen, everyone," she began, her voice soft and weak. "The Sawyer house, it had such a sad history, and there's a reason for that. They seemed to be a big happy family, but what made them happy was things. They were happy because Knox and Birdie loved each other. That's not bad, that's beautiful, but what was missing is, they didn't love God first. Actually, Birdie did. She loved God, but not first. She loved Him enough to talk to Knox about Him, and Knox had begun to listen to her about God, even though he'd always looked down on religious people. But there were bad entities in that house, demons. They came there because they knew that the Sawyer family was gonna do some amazing work for God, and the demons were not gonna let that happen. They knew that Birdie loved her children, more than anything. Probably more than she loved God. And so, they knew if they hurt her children, it would hurt Birdie. And they were right, weren't they?" Lily stopped and drew several deep breaths.

She was barely whispering, but Violet held the phone closer to her mouth.

"The demons were right," Lily went on. "After the baby died, Birdie lost the will to live, because she wasn't living for God. She didn't ask God what she could do to serve. She just gave up. She didn't think about how her other children were suffering at the loss of their baby sister and their seven-year-old sister. She gave in and let the demons destroy her. The whole family fell apart because they didn't have their base in God, who gives peace, who restores and who makes salvation possible, who overcomes death. They'd been happy because Knox was wealthy, they had a lovely home, Knox was the mayor so they had prestige, they had the admiration of the townspeople, they had anything they wanted materially. But when you don't have a basis in God, you don't have anything. Because *things* can change, *things* come and go, but God never changes. He is always there, always faithful in what He tells us and gives us, His children. His love is beyond what we can understand."

Lily stopped to catch her breath and then sighed. "I'm really tired. But listen, everyone, I love you. I love you all so much. I don't think I'm gonna make it. I don't want you to hurt. I'll be with Iris and we'll both be with Jesus. But you guys, don't be like the Sawyer family. Don't let this destroy you. I know you're gonna miss us. I know you're gonna grieve. But please, rise up and be strong and do amazing things and show other people how to handle the death of a loved one. Our earthly lives are like a drop in a bucket. I'll be with you all much longer than a few earthly years. Okay? I mean it. Please, don't let happen to you what happened to Knox' family. The demons are trying to hurt us now, because the Tanners are also supposed to do amazing things and bring a lot of people to Jesus and help a lot of people. Don't let them stop you." She stopped and moaned and put her hand to her head. "Oh, it hurts."

"Lily?" Violet said.

She was breathing hard, but she went on. "I'm almost done. I just want to say something to Justice. I wanna tell him what a pleasure it's been to know him. Justice, please don't let this destroy you. When we first got to the hospital, you said you were my fiancé. I'm gonna pretend that it's true. My big regret is gonna be to not be able to

have you hold me again. To have you kiss me again. When you hold me and kiss me, I feel like I'm in heaven. I regret that I won't get to really marry you, really experience you as my husband. Have you boss me around— and protect me— and help me and stand by me, like my father does for my mother. And I regret not being able to know you. I mean, know you, like in the Bible. To have a wedding night with you and experience that. I've heard it's pretty great."

"Uh, Lily, you might not want to say these personal things."

"No, it's okay. What difference does it make? I won't be around to be embarrassed by what I'm saying. I admit, Justice, I think about you touching me and making love to me. I guess that makes me a sinner. I'm sorry Jesus, but I've only had those thoughts about Justice, if that makes it any better."

Violet smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Uh, Vi?"

Violet turned at Daisy's voice.

"Dr. Kino and Cam are here."

"Okay."

Daisy smiled and came to Lily's bedside. "Hey sis."

"Hey. I'm in the middle of making a recording."

"Oh, sorry. I guess I messed it up. Go ahead and start over."

Lily tried to laugh. "Don't think I can." She looked up at her twin. "I love you Daisy."

"Love you too," Daisy said quickly, her brow furrowing. "But if you're trying to say goodbye to me I'm not gonna let you."

"Violet, make sure Daisy hears this video."

"I promise."

Lily began to cry again. "Daisy, I love you so much. So, ugh..."

Daisy's eyes opened wide as Lily began to seize.

"Go get Jeffy," Violet ordered as she ended the video and reached for the bedside button to call a nurse.

In only a few seconds Jeffy was at her bedside, and a few seconds later, two nurses came running in.

"Bring me two milligrams of lorazepam."

The nurse looked confused.

"I'm doctor Kino Wallace. Did Dr. Filmore not tell you I am consulting on this case?"

"Oh, Dr. Kino! I'm so sorry, yes, right away Doctor."

Jeffy laid her hand on Lily's head. "Reach out, sweetie, come on, can you hear me, Lily? I'm right here. I see you, reach out."

The nurse rushed in and administered the medication into the IV.

Jeffy kept speaking soft words to Lily. Finally, she saw her and Lily reached out her hand to Jeffy in a vision in her head.

"Help me," Lily pleaded.

"I'm working on it. Take my hand, Lily. Come on back. Thatta girl. Come on back

to me."

✝✝✝

January 30th 11:30 AM Thursday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn

The men who would be inside the house kept on their white uniforms. The members of the twelve who weren't martial artists coincidentally, or synchronistically, brought tan slacks and white shirts to wear, except for Sakchai who had a white suit. The four designated for outside the house were in full Ameritech gear, including Chaz. They were about to head out. They'd just listened in to a livestream on Gabe's website of another prayer circle organized by the women folk back home. Then the men had all taken time to fill in their wives with what was going down, and who the twelfth man turned out to be.

Just as they were heading out, Eric got a call from Jeffy.

"Hello, Jeffy, we were just heading out. Everything okay?"

Jeffy sighed heavily. "No, everything is not okay. First, Lily had a seizure just as I got here. I sent her down for another CT scan. There has been a small brain bleed. We are monitoring her, but will probably have to turn to surgery."

"So, time is running short."

"Correct."

"You said first. Does that mean there's something else?"

"Yes sir. It's Iris. Her fever spiked, she's losing the battle and she has slipped into a coma. She doesn't have long. The thing is, Dad, she made it through the night and that in itself is a miracle, so, I mean, there has to be a reason God hasn't taken her yet. Dad, whatever you guys are about to do, you have to succeed."

"Understood."

"Let me know something," Jeffy said. "And keep your phone on you, in case I get anything you need to know."

"Understood." He ended the call and looked at Keegan and Gabe. It wouldn't be honest to keep the news from them. "Keegan, Gabriel, Iris has slipped into a coma, and Lily has a small brain bleed that is being monitored and Jeffy may have to operate."

Keegan sighed and nodded.

"Can you give me your thoughts, Keegan?" Eric asked.

Keegan drew a deep breath. "Sometimes, when on the battlefield, before you can get to a wounded man who's down, you have to take out the gunner. So— let's do this."

Gabe's eyes narrowed. "Copy that. We got this, Dad."

Keegan nodded. It was the first time he felt like he and Gabe were on a battlefield together. And the stakes were the highest they could be.

Gathering their packs that held their Bibles, anointing oil and a few other odds and ends, they got into several different vehicles and headed into town. A few of them parked in the spaces right in front of the house. The rest parked in the GTCC parking lot and walked across the little city park. They gathered in front of the old Sawyer home, courageously looking up at the upper windows, wondering what they were about to face.

There was no fear. Each man only had a prayer in his heart that they would not fail.

Not fail the Sawyers. Not fail the Tanners. And not fail God.

They all noticed when the Sheriff's car pulled up and parked across the street in front of *Appel Martial Arts*. Ty Stewart got out with one of his deputies, Levi Moore. They crossed the street and approached the men assigned to guard the perimeters of the house. Chaz moved forward and shook their hands.

"You guys ready to take on the enemy?" Ty asked.

"Don't know about that, but we're willing," Chaz said. "Thanks for coming to cover our six."

"Anything for you, bro," Ty said with a smile.

"Let's get in position," John said quietly. "Tanner, stay here in front. I'll go opposite, on the west side. Davis, take the south side, Chaz, get the north. Ty, you and Deputy Moore do whatever you intend to do."

"We'll just keep watch and move in if there's a need."

"Did you communicate with the Pine Forest Police?" Keegan asked.

"Yes. Told them you guys were having a big prayer meeting at this place and have had some threats made and we were gonna provide some security. If we need them, they'll be here."

John nodded. "Good. Let's move out." He turned and bowed to Grandmaster Kino. "Sir. May God be with you."

Eric nodded and bowed slightly. He then glanced around at the others. "Let's head in."

As John, Keegan, Jeff and Chaz circled the building to get in position, Eric and the rest headed up the steps of the new front deck. Thomas moved forward and unlocked the door. The ground shook ever so slightly, enough that they felt it beneath their feet. The men's eyes opened wide. Eric turned and smiled at them. "Intimidation tactic. Our light is stronger. No fear."

"Don't feel fear. Feel ready to kick someone's arse," Billy quipped, making them all smile.

Eric started to walk through the door but Jason stopped him. "Wait. Justin and I will go in first. You can follow us."

Eric nodded and allowed them to proceed. Nothing happened. Eric walked in and it seemed the floor shook. After Eric, Ricky, Mark and Joey stepped through the door, then Henrik and Andrew, Billy and Ces, Ronny and Sakchai, Miguel and Lev, Alo and Thomas. Gabe was about to step through, but the door slammed in his face, causing him to stumble backward to land on the deck.

Keegan, watching from the walk out front of the house started forward, but Gabe rose and waved him off. "I'm okay."

Young Eric moved forward and tried to open the door. It wouldn't budge. He turned and looked at Logan and JoJo. Together they tried to open the door, but as they tried, it opened from the inside. Grandmaster Kino stood there, and nodded at Gabe, who sighed heavily and walked into the house followed by young Eric, JoJo and lastly Logan.

Gabe looked around at all the men staring at him. He smiled and shrugged. "I guess

they don't want me here."

"Guess not," Billy said with a chuckle. "But they really don't have a say in it, now do they?"

"They tried to shut out the brightest light," Alo said.

Gabe sighed and looked heavenward. "Dear Lord Jesus, be with us this day."

The house shook again, not violently, but the way a house might shake that is built close to train tracks. Suddenly, each of the twelve slightly gasped as they each thought they heard something in their ear.

"Did anyone else just hear something?" Ces asked.

"I heard the number ten," Sakchai said.

"I also heard a number," Lev said. "The number eleven."

Eric nodded. "Did everyone hear a number?"

"I heard seven," Billy said.

"I heard two," Ronny said.

Eric nodded. "Whoever heard a number, get in line in that order."

As it turned out, the only ones who heard numbers were members of the twelve, which left out the reinforcements, Ricky, Justin, Jason, Mark, Joey, young Eric, JoJo, Logan and Justice.

Gabe was number six and he got in line and looked down the line. The order went, Grandmaster Kino, Ronny, Thomas, Alo, Miguel, Gabe, Billy, Henrik, Andrew, Sakchai, Lev, and finally Ces number twelve. But, something wasn't quite right. Gabe closed his eyes and then opened them again. "Um, Grandmaster Kino?"

"Did you get something, Gabe?"

"Yes sir. I don't mean to be cocky, but I feel like the Lord just told me it's a clock. A clock."

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, that's exactly what I was thinking. Good job Gabe. So, guys, stand in a circle and Granddad, you're at one o'clock."

The men exchanged positions and looked around and nodded.

"This feels right," Miguel said.

"I wonder why it matters what order they're in," Logan said aloud.

It was Justin who answered. "Not sure why it matters, but it appears they're in order of location. It seems they're all over the place but from Eric headed west, next is Ronny, Thomas, Alo, Miguel, etcetera."

"But shouldn't Gabe come after Alo then?" JoJo asked.

Ricky shook his head. "No. Because Gabe is not representing Georgia. He's representing Greenland."

"Ahh, very good," Henrik said.

Eric's phone buzzed and he answered immediately. "Yes, Jeffy?"

"Ricky, Uncle Justin, Uncle Jason, Mark and Joey, Justice, young Eric, JoJo and Logan, spread out and stand in a circle around them. Visualize shields of light around the twelve at all times. You have power. Do not doubt."

The men immediately got into position.

"Okay, we got it. Anything else?" Eric said.

"Nothing I want to tell you right now. Just quiet your minds and listen. You'll know what to do. They'll try to distract you. Listen."

Eric pocketed his phone and looked at the group. "Get your Bibles in hand and let us pray," he said quietly. "One long prayer. I'll start and pass to you, Ronny, all the way around. Say what comes into your head, do not doubt."

✝✝✝

"So," Keegan said in his com. "Was it just me or did you guys feel the ground shake a minute ago?"

"Yeah, I felt it," Chaz said.

"Yeah, me too," Jeff said. "Is that the bad guys?"

"Well, it happened the moment Eric walked into the house," Keegan said. "So, yeah, I'm thinkin' that's the bad guys."

"They are a powerful enemy, but we all know light is stronger than dark," John said.

"Yes," Keegan said quietly. "And currently the dark seems to be driving a black Cadillac Escalade with dark tinted windows. Cruisin' north on Main. Chaz you should see them right now. He's stopped at the light."

"I see him, and do you see that he just rolled down his window?"

"I do, shaved head. Tats on his neck, making eye contact with you, Chaz. Don't look away."

Keegan watched as the light turned green and the guy rolled his window back up and slowly moved up Main Street. "I see movement in the back seat, so I gather the car is full. Ty, you see this?"

"I do. We might need reinforcements."

"I'm about to have contact." John said. "One guy, coming from College Street area, white, wearing jeans and black t-shirt. Also tatted up. "What can I do for ya?" John said.

The others listened in as John chatted with someone, then heard a few grunts and heavy breathing and then, "Ty, I got one for ya to pick up."

"Roger that," Ty said.

While Ty and Levi took care of the one John had just encountered Keegan spoke quietly. "Okay, so, that guy might have gotten out of the Caddy before we saw them, or he could be part of another whole group of guys, so keep your heads on a swivel."

"Roger that," Jeff said.

✝✝✝

The moment Eric began to pray the house shook again. As each man prayed it shuddered on and off. Alo almost lost his balance, but Miguel reached out to steady him. Eric also grabbed Ronny's arm and held him tightly. Ronny smiled with gratitude for Eric's strength.

When they finished praying, Eric nodded. "Let's go around again and read a scripture." He opened his Bible and read, " Ephesians 6:10-18. 'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this

present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.'"

As Eric read, they heard a loud bang upstairs, but Eric continued to read, raising his voice and projecting powerfully.

After Eric, Ronny, holding his Bible, recited, "James 4:7, 'Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.'"

Thomas then read, "2 Thessalonians 3:3, 'But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.'"

Alo read, "2 Corinthians 10:4-5, 'The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.'"

Next, Miguel read, "Jude 1:9, 'But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you.'"

Gabe then lifted his Bible to read his verse. "Romans 8:37-39, 'No, in all these...'" He got no further before the Bible that Ces held where he stood in the number twelve position on the clock just across from Gabe, went flying out of his hands and hit Gabe square in the face. Gabe fell to the floor. Young Eric, JoJo and Logan rushed to him to help him up and pulled him to his feet quickly.

"We got you, bro," young Eric said.

Standing next to him, Billy asked, "You okay, son? You're bleeding."

Gabe wiped at his mouth. The spine of the Bible had busted his lip. "I'm good, sir," Gabe said, his mouth set in a straight line. He passed Ces' Bible around to get it back to its owner, reopened his own Bible, held fast to the book, and braced his legs apart for balance as the house began to tremble harder. "No," Gabe read loudly, almost yelling, "...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor *demons*," he read emphasizing the word 'demon,', "...neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor ANYTHING else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. SO THERE," he yelled. "You won't be able to separate us. It's already done. Jesus did it already. You can't win. Do you hear me? You can't win!"

Something flew across the room from the mantle over the fireplace. Gabe saw it and his reflexes kicked in. He used a high block to knock down the coffee mug some worker had left behind. It shattered on the floor.

Gabe glanced at Billy next to him. “It’s your turn, sir,” he said calmly.

Billy grinned. “Ach, I really like this young man.”

The others smiled.

Billy held his Bible up in front of his face but didn’t have to read his scripture. He quoted, “Isaiah 54:17, ‘No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord.’”

Gabe couldn’t hold back. “And WE are the servants of the Lord, and YOU cannot win,” he yelled out. He looked around. “Sorry, everyone, but they pissed me off.”

“Looks like they pissed off the wrong one,” Billy said with a laugh.

“Righteous anger is good, Gabe,” Eric said. “Don’t apologize for your passion and your love of God.”

“I’m not apologizing for that, Grandmaster Kino, sir. I was just apologizing for interrupting the readings,” he added with a smile and a shrug and then nodded at Henrik. “Sir, it’s your turn.”

The group chuckled.

Henrik lifted his Bible. “1 Peter 5:8-9, ‘"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

“Good one,” Gabe muttered.

Next Andrew spoke. “It is a good one and is the one I was gonna read, so, let me find another quickly.” He thought a moment and then thumbed to the right page. “Luke 10:19, ‘Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.’”

Sakchai then raised his Bible. “Matthew 10:1, ‘And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.”

Gabe nodded. “Yeah, and right now, that twelve is us!” he exclaimed.

The men all smiled and nodded.

Lev read, “1 John 3:8, ‘ The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy– the devil’s– work.’”

Last but not least, Ces finally raised his Bible again and held it fast. “Mark 16:15-18, ‘And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.’”

Eric nodded as all eyes turned to him. “Well now, that was an interesting and eventful reading of the scriptures. Does anyone have anything they’d like to add? Any comments?”

"Yes," Ronny said softly. "When my little church had no music, we really lost the Spirit. Music adds so much, but we didn't realize it until it was gone from us. I was thinking to bring the Spirit in here big time, let's sing a song, or maybe even get Logan to sing for us or with us."

"I think that's a lovely idea, Ronny. Logan? What say you?"

Logan smiled. "I say, let's get our praise on! I didn't bring my guitar, but we can go acapella. Any requests?"

Young Eric smiled. "I have an affinity for *How Great Thou Art*."

"That's a good one. Sing it," Thomas said.

"Okay, but sing long with me, anyone who feels like it. Please."

Logan sang the first line, "Oh Lord my God..."

All but a few joined in. Those who didn't know the words or the song, listened intently and it wasn't long before there were tears in their eyes. The song definitely held the Spirit of God. They sang loud, they sang it beautifully and the whole house began to vibrate.

Eric suddenly fell to the floor, with a loud smack as he pivoted and rolled. Ricky and Justin quickly helped him back up.

"Keep singing," Ricky said and then leaned close to his father. "What happened?"

"It felt like something pushed me down. Something very strong. It shoved me from behind."

They stood him up and braced him from behind.

They sang the song slowly. Powerfully. It seemed others were singing with them. A chorus of heavenly angels. It was amazing. The men all smiled and looked around literally thinking they would see the roof open up and angels singing in the clouds above them.

Gabe had to laugh with glee, the feeling was so strong. This was amazing. He sang louder, switching to harmony, reveling in the beauty of what was taking place. As the song came to an end, he lifted his hands high and smiled. Next thing he knew, his body was airborne. He flew backward and slammed against the wall behind him and slumped to the floor.

His brothers flew to his side immediately.

"Gabe, you okay?"

Gabe groaned and let them help him up. "Uh, that hurt."

"It looked like it hurt," JoJo said.

"Just knocked the breath out of me," Gabe mumbled. "I'm okay."

They helped him back to his place in the circle.

Eric nodded at him. "You okay, Gabe?"

"Yes sir. I'm good. They can't hurt me. Do you hear that? God's got me," Gabe said loudly.

The men all smiled.

Gabe looked around. "I, uh, I'm sorry if I spoke wrongly."

"No. You're not wrong, young man," Thomas said.

"Actually," Eric said. "Thomas is right. You're not wrong. Actually, you are

absolutely right. Keep it up. You're pulling them out. You've got their attention. You're pulling them out of the woodwork, out of the nooks and crannies of this place. Out of the ground beneath. Keep it up."

Gabe shrugged. "Good, then I'll say what I was about to say before I got control of myself." He took a deep breath. "And ya know something else? JESUS is the light of the world," he yelled at the top of his lungs. "HE IS THE LIGHT! And we who follow Him will not walk in darkness. And you guys, are the darkness. You made a really bad choice. And here's a little secret you might not know, the light wins. Jesus wins. We WIN!"

The entire house trembled and shook. Suddenly, a wind began to blow. A vortex of wind, like a tornado inside the house. Everyone's hair blew wildly, dust and some papers and a staple gun and a hammer and the glass from the broken mug began swirling around the room.

"Hold steady everyone," Billy called out.

Miguel reached out and held onto Alo to steady him. Eric reached out and held onto Ronny.

"Take your right hand and grab the left wrist of the person next to you," Sakchai called out above the ruckus.

The twelve did as instructed, while the warriors on the outside of the circle took up positions trying to protect them all the best they could.

The enemy was moving fast. Joey and Jason both had their eyes on that hammer, and as it seemed to start toward Eric, Joey reached out and plucked it out of the air. Ricky knocked the staple gun down, but it swirled back up. Young Eric tried to grab it, but as he was distracted with that, in a split second, the glass shards from the mug flew at Gabe.

JoJo and Logan tried to block the pieces from him, and the three of them fell to the floor as the wind suddenly stopped.

They rolled over and stood up. The men looked the three young ones over. They were all bleeding. Logan and JoJo both had cuts on their forearms. Gabe had several cuts on his face, his left temple, his neck and his right hand.

Ces immediately went to his pack and pulled out some gauze pads, handing some to JoJo and Logan, and then worked on stopping the bleeding on Gabe's head and neck. None of the cuts were bad, just some deep scratches really.

Eric looked around the circle. "May I invite the twelve to sit, please. I just received a message. The rest, stay standing and stay alert."

Ricky, Jason, Justin, Joey, Mark, Justice, young Eric, JoJo, and Logan all spread out in a wide circle around the circle of men who were sitting on the floor. They were pretty quiet. Some of them stunned by the show of force and power they'd just witnessed.

Eric sighed. "Well, now, we can see a little clearer what we're dealing with I guess," he began.

"Yes, and it's pretty ugly," Henrik said.

"Ugly and childish in their response to Gabe's words," Ronny said.

"Yeah, very touchy," Thomas agreed.

"Gabe? You okay?" Eric asked.

"Yes sir. Ready to fight."

The men smiled. They could see why this youth was part of them and why they needed him. He was brave, strong, and somewhat innocent. He was fierce, and young and full of righteous anger.

"Good," Eric answered. "Because it's about to be a fight." He smiled at the group. "If I heard and saw correctly, while all that was happening, Jesus just told me that we will not rebuke or cast out these demons to leave here and go somewhere else in this world. They are about to have an early removal from the Earth, and that will involve us opening a portal. They will fight. They will try to do as much damage as possible to us and to others. They will not go quietly into that good night. They will go kicking and screaming, but the good news, they WILL go!"

He looked down as the phone in his uniform pocket buzzed. He pulled it out and read aloud the text from his daughter.

"A portal is confirmed. You will stand as Sakchai instructed, each of you grasping the wrist of the man next to you. This opening of a portal will not be complicated. No chanting or Latin words like you see in the movies. The power comes from within, and the power from within comes from Jesus. You will try and fail. Try again. Faith the size of a mustard seed. Believe."

He finished reading and looked up. "Well then. This sounds interesting. Are we all in? Are we ready?"

"Allow me to get a drink of water," Alo said.

Eric nodded. "Everyone drink some water. Then we'll pray for strength and get to it."

✝✝✝

Matthew 12:43-45

"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Outside the house, people came out of the stores and restaurants to look up and down the street. Most of them came to check with others to see if they really did experience an earthquake right here in Pine Forest, Georgia. However, they quickly zeroed in on the old Sawyer house because it appeared security agents were scuffling with gang members, throwing them down and cuffing them. The Pine Forest Police and Pine County Sheriffs were loading them into cruisers and taking them to the county holding cells.

They recognized some of their own citizens, Keegan Tanner, Chaz Stewart and John Appel as three of the four security agents. A few townspeople came over to ask Keegan what was going on, Mrs. Bonner who ran the floral shop, and Christopher Ragan who owned the Book Nook. Keegan quickly explained that they were having a prayer meeting inside the house and that some that hated Christians had heard about it and were trying to stop them.

"Well, isn't that silly," Mrs. Bonner, exclaimed, shaking her head. "What is this world coming to?"

Keegan nodded.

"I heard your daughters are ill," she went on.

He nodded again. "They are. That's why we're having this prayer meeting."

"Well, we'll all keep praying for them," Mrs. Bonner said.

"Thank you," he replied as his phone buzzed. "Excuse me, it's Lizzy probably giving me an update."

"Oh, yes, go ahead," she said with a smile.

Keegan turned his back and walked away a few steps.

"Hey baby, how's it going?"

Lizzy sniffed. "Keegan..."

When she didn't go any further his heart began to race. "Elizabeth, talk to me. Is Iris..., I mean, is she still with us?"

Lizzy sniffed again. "Yes, barely. Keegan, she went into cardiac arrest and they had to resuscitate her and she's now on life support. It was so hard to watch them work on her tiny little body. The doctors told me to be prepared. It doesn't look good. I overheard one of the nurses saying it would take a miracle."

Keegan drew a deep breath. "Well, sweetheart, that's what we're trying to make happen. A miracle. And so far it's not been an easy battle."

"Oh, Keegan, I know you're fighting hard. I shouldn't have called you. I just needed so badly to hear your voice."

He closed his eyes a moment as he called on the Lord to help him speak the right words that would help his sweet wife. "I'm glad you called me, baby. You can always

call me, always come to me, no matter what, and we'll work through these hard times together. No matter what, Liz. No matter what happens, you and I will be strong for the family. We'll help them to understand why things happen the way they do. We'll trust God. I promise you, baby, He will give us peace and help us through this hard time."

Lizzy breathed a sigh. "Oh, Keegan, I love you so much. That is exactly what I needed to hear."

"Hang in there baby. Tell Heather and Rose and Nolan and Jericho the same thing I just said, and ask them to please hang in there. And either you call Daisy or ask one of them, and tell Daisy and Violet and CJ the same thing. We all have to be on the same page. United. A united front to stand against this evil and show them that no matter what, we will not be defeated, we will not be angry with God or turn away from Him. We will trust Him."

"I will. I'll tell them right now."

"Good. I love you, Elizabeth, but baby, I have to go. It looks like more trouble is brewing."

"Be careful, Keegan."

"I promise."

✝✝✝

The twenty-one men inside the house, hydrated, prayed together and stood in their places assigned to them by the Lord. Each of the twelve used their right hand to grasp the left wrist of the person beside them. The other nine men circled behind them and spread out to encompass the entire group, a human wall of protection.

While the twelve were mentally, spiritually and physically preparing for the next round, the nine worked on preparing the home. They gathered the hammer, a staple gun, a tool box in the kitchen, paint brushes, some pvc pieces of pipe, some left over two-by-fours, some hard hats, rolls of duct tape and painter's tape, anything that could be hurled at them, and carried them out to the side yard.

The four men outside asked them what was going on and were surprised at the overt display being put on. It was so radical that no one would believe it. They hadn't checked the security cameras yet, but were looking forward to seeing if the action had been recorded.

Now, all twenty-one men stood ready. Eric directed Justice to be in close proximity to his grandfather, Thomas, Ricky to be in close proximity to Eric and either JoJo or Logan stay close to Gabe. Everyone else, no matter where they were, be alert and aware, because the outer nine warriors were, in essence, the bodyguards of the twelve.

They began and as the twelve tried to use the power of their minds to open a portal through which the demons would be expelled, the activity picked up again. It began with a trembling of the entire structure, the floor shaking, the walls appearing to actually move. A large crack appeared in the sheetrock near the stairwell and made it's way up to the second floor. Another giant wind picked up, making their hair whip around their heads, and their clothing flap against their skin.

"Obviously we're doing something," Eric said calmly. "Hitting a nerve, so, don't stop. See it. See it."

The wind got louder, it roared. The two wrought iron chandeliers over their heads swayed wildly. They battled only for about five minutes, but it was harder than one might think to concentrate so hard inside of a tornado.

Gabe looked up, his eyes getting big as for just a moment he thought he saw the roof lift off the house. Then it was back as it should be, but one of the chandeliers broke free in its spin and came straight at him. He tried to duck, but it happened so fast. Logan and JoJo jumped toward him to block for him and all three of them landed in a heap on the floor.

Gabe on the bottom, the chandelier against his chest. Logan on top and JoJo on top of Logan. They slowly removed themselves from the pile, to find that Gabe wasn't moving.

"He's not breathing," JoJo called out in a panic as he and Logan lifted the heavy chandelier off of Gabe's chest.

Ces, a gifted doctor, and Ricky, a certified EMT, moved in quickly.

"His heart is beating," Ces said.

Ricky was already in position to give mouth to mouth and leaned down to blow air into Gabe's lungs. He gave him three breaths and Gabe gasped and his eyes flew open.

Young Eric, JoJo and Logan didn't try to stop their tears of joy as they saw Gabe respond.

Ricky smiled down at the young man, and ran his hand over his hair in a fatherly gesture. "Gabe? How ya feelin'?"

Gabe sat up and nodded. "I'm good. How long was I out?"

"About thirty seconds," JoJo said.

Gabe's eyebrows shot up. "That's all? Really?"

"Yes, why?" Eric asked. "How long did you think you'd been out?"

Gabe shrugged. "An hour maybe."

They all got quiet.

"What did you see, Gabe?" Eric asked in his calm, quiet voice.

"I saw the tree. I saw Jesus. And I saw..." He had to stop as he realized what he saw and what it might mean. His eyes welled with tears and he sniffed and looked around, then continued. "And I saw Iris and Lily."

Everyone was quiet as they thought about that.

It was Justice who asked the question, his voice shaky. "Does that mean they've passed?"

Eric shook his head. "Not necessarily. Gabe saw both himself and me under that tree, and here we are. Did Jesus speak to you, Gabe?"

Gabe nodded. "Yes sir. He said that some of us are envisioning a portal opening to hell. He understood that, because we know that demons belong in hell. But that portal is only something God can open, and He *will* open it to send them to their destruction. But we must only open a portal that sends them out of this earthly dimension and He'll take it from there. I asked Him why He couldn't just open the portal for us, and He said, his usual answer. He said he could, but what good would that do? He said you have the power and you have to find your power to do this. You must learn to do it, under this

great pressure."

Eric nodded in understanding. They all nodded in understanding. It was something they'd taught to others all their lives. People would ask them why doesn't God just wave his arm and heal someone or make something better, get rid of evil, or stop all the wars or all the diseases. His answer was always, "what good would that do?" What would we learn from that? How would we get strong? How would we evolve? God accomplishes things through the works and doings of His children. That's how they learn and get strong and become worthy. Every once in a while, He must resort to divine intervention. But first, He watches and waits and nudges and points and inspires and motivates and emboldens us.

It reminded Eric of when Ricky was a little boy, how he taught him to use the little climbing wall in their back yard. He spoke and sometimes pointed the child to where he should place his foot, where his next step should be. Eric allowed Ricky to do it on his own, until he'd misstep and start to fall and only then would Eric step in and catch him. And what would happen next? Eric would have Ricky start again. But if all Eric did was pick Ricky up and place him at the top of the wall, what good would that do? What would Ricky accomplish? Nothing. No learning. No skill. No strength. No trust built. Nothing. It's not topping the wall that was important. It was the getting there. The climbing. The hard work. We have to choose to take that next step, so we can learn where to place our foot and then get strong by pulling ourselves up to the next level, and beginning to trust that we won't fall, or that He won't let us fall.

For some reason which had not been disclosed, the twelve of them were supposed to learn how to open a portal. They were supposed to know how it's done, how it feels to do it, see what it accomplishes, and help them to understand their true power. That power must be important. Maybe the twelve of them, learning about and knowing this power, will help them to know how to save people's lives or even help their souls by making a way for them somehow here in these last days. We don't know what we don't know. Walk by faith.

✝✝✝

Still January 30th 2:35 PM Thursday Afternoon

Old Sawyer Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

They'd been at it for two and a half hours. They were all exhausted, but they refused to give up.

Justice felt like he was gonna go mad. He was tired. Frustrated. And pretty much in mourning. He'd found happiness again, when he'd met Lily Tanner. His heart had begun to heal. He knew the two of them were supposed to be. Like both his grandfather and the Tanners said, the answer was right in front of him. It was, she was, the girl who was supposed to be his mate. The girl who helped him to feel that closeness with the Lord again. A closeness he'd missed. A closeness he craved. Lily was his soul mate, and now, it looked like God was gonna take her right back away from him. How could that be?

Justice was worried that these men would get tired and give up. He wondered how long they would go. A few of them were quite old. How long could they keep this up?

Please don't quit, Justice prayed silently. Don't give up. Lily and Iris are depending on us. He glanced around. They'd all taken a seat on the floor for a few minutes and sipped some water. They were pretty quiet. Please don't give up, he thought again. He looked over at Lily's brother, Gabe Tanner. He had blood on his face and on his white uniform. His jaw was set. His eyes looking straight ahead. He looked fierce. Justice knew that he wouldn't give up.

"Justice, be strong."

Justice looked around. "Granddad? What did you just say?"

Thomas shook his head. "I didn't speak."

Justice blew out a deep breath. Was the Lord speaking to him? He was trying to be strong, wasn't he? What more could he do?"

"Be bold," he heard, and looked upward. I'm trying, he thought.

"Try harder."

He drew a deep breath and nodded his head and stood.

Grandmaster Kino got a text. His face grim, he read it aloud to the group. "This is from Jeffy. 'Iris is fading. We are about to prep Lily for surgery. Listen to me, Dad. You have to keep trying. In this next session, no matter what happens, don't stop. Even if someone gets hurt, or falls down, don't let that distract you. No matter what, don't stop doing what Jesus has asked you to do. Don't anyone stop. DO NOT STOP'."

Eric sighed. "The last words are in all caps." He looked around. "Okay, guys, so, logically, God would not bring us this far to abandon us, so we must be close. He wants us to succeed. We must succeed. So, we need to go into this with the mindset that we ARE gonna break the boards."

He smiled at the ones who didn't understand what he was talking about. "Let me explain. When a student is learning to break boards in martial arts, it seems almost impossible, to them. Those of us who've mastered it know that it is not impossible. We know it's really a tweaking of the mind. 'I will not fail,' is what we tell ourselves. 'I WILL break the board and if I don't do it on the first try, I WILL STILL do it. I will not stop until I do it.' Those of us who break boards on a regular basis know that it can be done. That must be what Jesus is thinking right now. He wouldn't assign us to open a portal when it can't be done. So, it *can* be done. So, what that means is, no matter what, don't stop. Don't stop your mind, don't get distracted. Concentrate and focus on the task."

They all nodded.

"Are we ready?" Eric asked.

They all got back on their feet and looked around the circle at each other.

"Even if someone falls down, don't stop visualizing," Miguel said softly.

Lev nodded. "I won't stop."

"Nor will I," Ronny said, reassuring the others, knowing he was a weak link, but trying very hard to not be.

Alo nodded solemnly. "I will go, until I die, and I will gladly give my life for Lily and Iris."

Gabe got emotional at that, and choked back the tears. This man was offering his

life for two young girls he didn't even know.

JoJo nodded at the words of the man who will probably be his father-in-law. Then he looked up at Thomas Sawyer, whom they'd discovered, was JoJo's great uncle on his biological mother's side. Then he glanced at Grandmaster Kino. The stepfather of JoJo's father, and JoJo's own grandfather. "And I will protect you all," JoJo suddenly felt inclined to say.

Grandmaster Kino smiled and nodded. The warriors were emerging.

Young Eric put his hand on Gabe's shoulder. "We got you bro. I too will give my life for your sisters."

"I'm all in. Let's do this," Billy Wallace proclaimed.

The men smiled and grasped the wrist of the man next to them.

Ricky, Justin, Jason, Mark, Joey, Justice, Logan, JoJo and young Eric all circled around.

"See the portal," Eric directed quietly. "Father, lead us, guide us, give us strength, please, in Jesus' name."

"Amen," they all whispered.

Again, as they began, an internal wind picked up and their hair flew out around them and their clothing began to flap wildly against their skin.

"So, we have this part down," Eric said. "We've got this part. We can begin fairly quickly. Always as soon as we begin, the wind starts. We know something is happening. Now, the question is, can we finish?"

They heard the house groan, almost as if it were in pain. Then they actually heard the word, "NO."

They all looked around, stunned that they heard an audible word from the demons. It was low, deep and guttural. As if that wasn't surprising enough, what they heard next sent chills through them.

"THEY ARE MINE."

Maybe the demons thought that would scare them. It didn't. It made them fiercer than ever and their thoughts of opening the portal got stronger.

Justice felt what the demons said deeply in his soul and he became what the Lord told him to be. Bold. "Well, I've got news for you," he suddenly shouted. "They are NOT yours," Justice yelled loudly above the wind.

The house shook violently.

"They are not yours, they are MINE!" Justice yelled. "They are mine and you can't have them."

A Bible lifted off the floor where each man had laid them at their feet and flew at Justice. He ducked and it hit the wall.

Justice yelled again. "You can't have them. Lily and Iris are mine. They are ours," he said again, patting Gabe on his shoulder. "They are God's," he continued. "You can't have them."

"THEY— ARE— DEAD."

Justice swallowed back the fear those words brought and moved from outside the circle to the very center of the twelve. His eyes focused upward, he turned around

slowly, watching for flying objects.

"They are not dead," Justice argued. "Even if they die from your stupid little stunts, they are not dead. They are with God. They will always live. Always. They are with Jesus who is the light of the world. HE– IS– THE– LIGHT!" he yelled. "And Lily and Iris belong to Him. And so do all of us. Like Gabe said earlier, you CANNOT win. You WILL not win. No matter what. We will not be defeated. You have no real power. You don't..."

Justice flew back, through the circle, past the outer circle of men and slammed into the wall. He moaned but immediately reminded the twelve, "Don't stop. Don't you dare stop."

Mark and Joey helped Justice to his feet, patted him on the back and he nodded his head to let them know he was okay.

"Big deal," he immediately yelled as he rushed back to the center. "I don't care what you do to me. You can't defeat me because I've already won. Jesus has me. Jesus has all of us. You can't hurt me," he yelled. "You can't hurt us!"

This time he was slammed against the wall and held there. Then he was pushed up the wall until his head slammed into the ceiling and then he was dropped the twelve feet to the floor.

This time young Eric and Logan helped him up.

"Don't stop," Ricky reminded everyone.

"You are weak," Justice yelled, again making his way into the center. "Your antics make me laugh. So stupid. So childish. You thought when you took out Knox's children and his wife that you destroyed the Sawyer family. Well you failed at that, didn't you! You failed and you're about to fail again big time. YOU FAILED," he yelled a few more times.

This time he flew up into the air, his arms and legs flailing in startled reflex. His back hit the broken metal from the chandelier on the ceiling and he grunted with the pain. Then he slammed into the floor. Everyone looked down at him, a blood stain blossoming on his back looking bright red on the white of his shirt. He rolled over. "Do not stop," he reminded the men again. "Please don't stop. Make it happen. SEE IT," he screamed.

JoJo and Logan lifted him to his feet.

"Look," Gabe said.

They all looked at Gabe, but he was staring upward. Their eyes followed his and their mouths opened in surprise.

The ceiling was no longer there. The second floor was not there. The roof was not there. They were staring up into the sky. It was almost three in the afternoon and the sky should've been light, but they were staring up into a night sky. They could see stars and a streak of golden light, like the tail of a shooting star and around it all, it looked almost like a circular rainbow. It was so very beautiful and they all became emotional.

Justice's heart felt like it might explode with joy. They were doing it!

Eric kept the task at hand uppermost in his mind. "Don't stop," he reminded them once again. "Don't let what you're seeing distract you. Don't stop."

The house began to scream. The sound was so loud, so appalling, so loathsome, so offensive, it almost made their blood curdle in the their veins.

"Concentrate," Sakchai yelled.

Ces nodded. "Focus," he shouted above the noise.

They heard glass breaking upstairs first, and then in the kitchen. The shards gathered into the vortex, whipping around them in the wind, cutting their faces, necks, arms, any exposed skin.

Before that could even register, Justice was lifted again, his body floating upward. JoJo and Logan ran forward and reached for him, each grabbing a leg, but then they too began lifting into the air. Ricky and young Eric ran forward to grab Logan, while Mark and Joey ran forward to grab JoJo.

"Do not sto..." Eric began, but his words were choked off literally. He pulled his wrist free of Ronny's grasp and let go of Ces' wrist and reached for his own throat, trying to remove whatever had hold of him.

Justin and Jason caught him as he stumbled backward, trying to figure out what was wrong, because whatever had him, was invisible to their eyes.

The house roared at them. Ricky, young Eric, Mark and Joey held onto Logan and JoJo with all of their might. Alo dropped to his knees as he began to black out. Ronny went down. Lev stumbled backward and Sakchai reached to help him.

"Don't stop," Gabe yelled fiercely as he looked around, seeing everyone drop to their knees.

The screams, the wind, the battle came to a feverish pitch and then— everything stopped. Justice, JoJo, and Logan, all fell to the floor, landing on Ricky, young Eric, Mark and Joey. At the same time the shards of glass and dust fell innocuously to the floor.

Eric gasped as he was finally able to get some air. The men peeled off the pile and checked to make sure they were all okay. Justice was dizzy and breathing hard. Ricky helped him to sit up. Everyone checked on the one next to them. Alo sat up. Ronny sat up. Sakchai helped Lev to sit down.

Gabe walked to the window and looked up at the sky. He took note of his father and the others and Pine Forest Police and Sheriffs and townspeople milling around, then turned. "So, Grandmaster Kino, did we do it? Are we free and clear?"

Eric breathed deeply. "I feel like we did. I feel like they are gone. What do you all think?"

"They are gone," Andrew said in his thick accent. "I know of a certainty that they are gone."

Henrik nodded. "They are definitely gone. The Sawyer home is free. The Sawyers are free."

Thomas nodded. "We are free, and the Tanners are also free."

Billy smiled. "Ach, now, lads, that was an adventure, wasn't it?"

The men chuckled.

Justice looked at Gabe. "Now, we just need to know that Lily and Iris made it through."

Gabe nodded.

At that moment, the front door opened. Keegan, John, Jeff and Chaz entered.

"Sorry, we didn't want to disturb, but felt like we needed to make sure you were all still alive," John said, his eyes opening wide as they swept the bloody scene. Every one of them was cut and bleeding on their faces and necks and arms.

Keegan immediately searched for Gabe and smiled with relief as he saw him standing upright and smiling.

"What in the hell happened in here?" Jeff asked.

Grandmaster Kino chuckled. "Exactly."

It was Jason who answered. "The dark forces we fight every day made themselves evident. Hopefully, our cameras picked it all up and you can watch the antics of demons throwing a fit."

"What did you hear or see from outside?" JoJo asked.

"Not much really," Chaz answered. "There was an earthquake. It registered on the USGS as a 2.1. All the people in town came out to see what was happening. We told them a prayer meeting was taking place for the girls. We didn't see anything else happen until the windows busted out on the second floor. We didn't want to mess up the prayer meeting, but thought we needed to come check on you. After all, you've been in here three hours."

Eric nodded. "Three hours. From noon to three."

Miguel smiled. "Sound familiar? Three hours of darkness during the time Jesus hung on the cross."

Eric smiled. "Interesting indeed." He glanced down at the phone as it buzzed. It was Jeffy. "Yes, Jeffy, you're on speaker. Tell us all some good news please."

"Good news?" she said. "Well, Jesus lives. He overcame death and holds the keys. Because of Him and His grace, we are all saved."

Billy laughed. "That is good news indeed. But really, tell us about the young lassies. How are they doing?"

"Well," Jeffy began. "We were just about to do brain surgery on Lily, to try to keep the aneurysm from completely rupturing and stop any further brain bleeding. She is already sedated, but when we saw the final scan, we couldn't find the bleed— or the aneurysm. We're doing another scan, but I examined her, I went into her with my mind, and there is no aneurysm. There is no bleed at all. There is nothing. When she wakes up, she will be good as new."

Justice swayed on his feet and then dropped to his knees. "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you," he cried openly.

Gabe laid a hand on his shoulder. "Amen," he said softly and then looked up at his father. "And Iris?"

Keegan shook his head. "I don't know yet. I haven't had time."

"Dr. Kino?" Gabe asked. "Do you know what's happening with Iris?"

"I do. Do you have your phone on you, Mr. Tanner?"

Keegan nodded. "I do," he said as he pulled it out. Before he could even look at it, a video call came in and he immediately accepted the call.

"Elizabeth? Is everything okay?"

Lizzy sniffed and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Oh, Keegan," she cried. "I really wish you were here."

He frowned. "I'm on my way," he said softly. "Hold on, baby."

Gabe's eyes filled.

"Okay, I'm holding on. But first, there's someone who wants to speak with you." She turned the phone.

Keegan's eyes got big and his smile was wide.

"Daddy, Mommy says dat you are far away."

He cleared his throat. "I'm about an hour away, baby girl."

"Will you come get me?"

"I'm on my way, sweetie. Hold on."

"Okay. And Mommy says that Gabe comed home."

Keegan chuckled. "Yes he did."

"I want Gabe."

"Okay. I'll bring him with me."

"Okay, Daddy."

"You wanna talk to him? He's standing right here."

"Yes! I want Gabe!"

Gabe took the phone. "Hey, my flower girl."

"Hi Gabe! I missed you."

"I missed you too. How are you feeling?"

"I not sick anymore but the doctor says I have to stay here the whole day and another sweep."

Gabe chuckled. "Just one more sleep and you'll come home, but I'll come see you right now."

"Okay. I wove you, Gabe."

"I love you too, baby girl," he said, his voice choking with emotion.

"Why is you cwying?" Iris asked.

Gabe laughed. "I'm just happy to see you."

The men all smiled and nodded at each other.

"It feels very good," Lev began, "to be witness to the love in this amazing Tanner family, and to feel their relief and their gratitude."

"I'm so grateful that we finally accomplished the task the Lord set upon us," Ces said softly.

"So grateful," Andrew added with a nod.

"Well, my gratitude knows no bounds right now," Keegan said. "Would you mind if my son and I kneel right here and give thanks?"

"Of course not," Eric said. "As long as you allow us to join you. We were about to pray to close this thing out and leave this old house with a grand blessing and anointing."

Keegan nodded. "Oh good. Yes, please join us, and then maybe all of you might need a little bit of first aid administered."

The men chuckled. “Yeah, that might be a good idea,” Ces said. “You all look a little worse for wear.”

Jeffy, still on the phone, got their attention. “Well, Daddy, and everyone, I have one more message for you. It’s from Jesus. He says, ‘Well done my good and faithful servants.’”

The twenty-five hardened warriors in the room all broke down in tears.

✝✝✝

January 30th, 3:45 PM Thursday Afternoon

Pine Forest Memorial Hospital

Gabe and Keegan stopped at the entrance to the ICU waiting room. They both frowned in confusion. They thought they heard Lily speaking. They listened for a minute. She was saying, “I’m almost done. I just want to say to Justice what a pleasure it’s been to know him. Justice, please don’t let this destroy you. When we first got to the hospital, you said you were my fiancé. I’m gonna pretend it’s true.”

They walked into the room. Surprised, Cam, CJ and Violet turned with big smiles. Violet immediately rushed forward into her father’s arms.

“Daddy, I thought you two were gonna go straight up to Atlanta.”

He squeezed her hard. “We were, but we pass right by here on the way and Gabe thought maybe we should at least just stop by for a minute.”

“Ugh, I’m so glad you did. Daisy and Jeffy are in with Lily right now.”

Keegan nodded. “Okay.” He turned to nod at the guys. “Cam, CJ, good to see you guys.”

“You too, sir,” Cam said. “It’s been a rough few days.”

“Yeah it has,” Gabe put in with a smile.

They looked him over. “You look like hell,” CJ said.

Gabe smiled. “Yeah, I’ve been battling hell. But you should see Justice. He’s a lot worse. He’s down in the ER right now getting his back all stitched up.”

“What happened?”

“Well, it’s a long story, and I’m told there’s video of what took place, but in a nutshell, he’s was stabbed in the back by a broken piece of metal sticking out from the ceiling where the chandelier used to hang.”

CJ frowned. “From the ceiling? How did Justice get stabbed by something on the ceiling?”

Gabe sighed and nodded. “Right? He was lifted into the air by unseen forces and thrown up against the ceiling.”

They all stood silently a moment.

“Gotta see that video,” Cam said softly.

They all nodded.

Keegan smiled. “So, when we first came up to the door here, we thought we heard Lily’s voice.”

Violet nodded. “Oh, yeah, you did. We were listening to the recording Lily made when she thought she wasn’t gonna make it through the day.”

“Oh, well, go ahead. I’d like to hear that.”

"Well, I was actually about to stop it just as you came in because it's to the place where she says some pretty personal stuff to Justice."

Keegan nodded. "I see. Well, I'd still like to hear it, so I'll ask Lily if she'll share it with me."

"And if it was directed to me, I too will ask Lily if she'll share it."

They all turned as Justice came in the door.

"Hey, Justice," Violet said moving forward and giving him a hug.

He grunted as she touched his back.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I just heard you were stabbed in the back by a chandelier."

Justice smiled. "No, I was stabbed in the back by a demon who wanted to kill me, and Lily and Iris."

"You shoulda seen this guy," Gabe said. "He yelled at the bad guys, got them all riled up, and they went after him."

"You did too, Gabe. They didn't like us very much."

Gabe nodded. "No they did not."

Justice smiled. "They even tried to keep you out."

"How did they do that?" CJ asked.

"They slammed the door in his face," Justice said.

Violet frowned. "Well, you both look like you've been in an explosion. Your faces are all scratched up. Gabe, your mouth is all swollen. How did that happen? Did you get punched by a demon?"

Gabe chuckled. "No. His weapon of choice was a Bible. But that was also our weapon of choice, so, it all worked out."

The group smiled.

"Again," Cam said. "Can't wait to see that video."

Jeffy and Daisy entered the room.

Keegan smiled as Daisy rushed into his arms.

Jeffy smiled and went to hug Gabe and Justice.

"Good job in there guys. You were both rock stars."

Gabe sighed. "Thank you, Dr. Kino. And thanks for working so hard to keep my sisters alive."

"I'm just grateful that God was with us. It was all Him."

"Well, I'd like to see my daughter," Keegan said. He turned to Justice. "Gabe and I will just poke our heads in and say hello, and then we're headed up to Atlanta, so you can have Lily all to yourself."

Justice smiled and nodded. "Thank you, sir." He raised his eyebrows. "And while they do that, I want to hear the recording. So, Violet, will you go ask Lily real quick if she would allow that?"

Violet smiled. "Sure, Justice. Anything for you."

Violet, Keegan and Gabe headed to Lily's room. She looked up with a giant smile. "Daddy! Gabe!"

"Hello, sweet girl," Keegan said, his voice warm and soft.

"Lily, before you and Dad get all emotional together, Justice is here and wants to

know if he can hear the video recording you made while he waits for Dad and Gabe to get out of his way."

Lily giggled, her hands clapping together. "Justice is here?"

"Yes. He's gonna wait for you to speak with Dad and Gabe and they have to leave pretty quickly because Iris is desperately waiting on them. Then I think Justice plans to hog you. So, can I show him the video?"

She sighed. "Um, well, oh man, I said some crazy stuff, but, ya know what? He already knows most of that anyway, so, yeah, go ahead. Show him, or, like, anyone in our family, I guess. I want them all to know how much I love them."

Violet nodded. "Okey, dokie, sis. You got it. I'll leave you to Dad and Gabe."

"Thank you, Vi. I love you!"

Violet smiled. "I love you too, Lily. And I am walking on air that you're gonna be okay."

"Me too!" she said excitedly.

Violet left the room and Lily's eyes looked into the loving, caring eyes of her father and brother. She sniffed and held her hands out. "You guys."

They both moved forward, one on her right and the other on her left.

They each hugged her and kissed her cheek.

Gabe's eyes filled. "I thought I wasn't gonna see you again. Not in this life anyway. I can't tell you how happy I am that you're sitting here, talking, smiling, totally alive."

She nodded. "I know how you feel, because that's how I felt when you walked into Grandmaster Kino's room and begged them to not take him off life support. I'd already gone in your room and held your hand and kissed you goodbye and then suddenly, you were alive. So, Gabe, I get it." She turned to look at her father and he smiled and leaned down and held her tight.

"My baby girl," he said softly. "I'm so grateful you're still here with us. I will be forever grateful."

"Me too, Daddy. I love you so much." She turned to Gabe. "I love you too, little brother. I can't stop saying that to everyone."

Gabe nodded. "And I get that."

She sighed and looked closer at Gabe. "You're face is all cut up."

He nodded. "Yeah. The bad guys threw glass at me, and a Bible and then threw me."

"Oh no. That's terrible. What all happened?"

He laughed. "Too much to tell right now, because we have to go see Iris who's crying for us, but there is video, we think, if it's not distorted. Still, I'll tell you this. It was Justice who really took them on there at the end. He saved the day. He drew them out by yelling at them and telling them they can't have you or Iris and then they threw him all over the place. Against the wall. Against the ceiling. And then, they like, tried to take him with them when they were being sucked out through the portal, though I doubt Jesus would've let that happen."

Lily's eyes filled with tears. "I hope he's okay."

"He is," Keegan said.

"Yeah, he's good," Gabe added. "I didn't mean to worry you. I just wanted you to know that Justice was strong in there. He was not gonna let them win. He was bound and determined to save you and got pretty riled up and it was very cool to be able to witness that."

"I can't wait to talk to him," she said softly.

"Well, sweetheart," Keegan said. "He's out there waiting on us to finish talking to you. So, we're gonna go ahead and leave. We just wanted to stop by and see you being alive and well. We thought we'd lost you and we were struggling quite a bit with that, but God is so good, He is so amazing and here you are talking and smiling and completely well."

Lily blinked up at him. "I can tell that you've been through a hard time, Dad. I'm sorry. I never want to cause you pain."

"Don't apologize for something you didn't do. Evil reached out and caused this, and we must never compromise. Got it?"

"Yes sir," she said with a grin. "Never."

Gabe leaned over and hugged her again. "Okay, Lily, I'll see you tomorrow. We'll all be together and it will be heaven."

"Yes, it will!" Lily said softly.

Keegan hugged and kissed his daughter. "See you tomorrow, baby girl. I think your mom might come see you this evening. Once we get up there to Iris, she'll come home, because she needs to nurse the twins."

Lily nodded. "I want to hug her so much."

"Who, your mom, or Iris?"

Lily nodded with a giggle. "Yes."

"Alrighty then," Gabe said. "We'll send Justice in."

Lily clapped her hands together. "Thank you. Do I look okay?"

Gabe looked her over, and smoothed some hair near the back of her head. "There. You look perfect."

✝✝✝

Out in the waiting room, Keegan and Gabe found Justice listening intently to the video recording Lily had made, a goodbye recording. She'd thought her life was over. She'd thought she'd never see her family or Justice again. Her message was honest and beautiful and filled with longing.

They waited until the recording was over and Justice looked up from Violet's phone. He nodded and rose. "Sir, Gabe, how is she?"

Keegan smiled. "She's good and is very much looking forward to the moment you poke you head in that room."

Gabe moved forward and shook Justice's hand. "Hey, I know I already said it, but you were great in there today. I really think your righteous anger is what got everyone focused and riled up enough to open the portal."

Justice sighed. "I was worried, ya know, that you would give up. I mean, not you individually, but everyone. I was worried that someone might think, 'hey, this is impossible, this is too hard, we can't do it.' You know, because actually, that's how it

seemed."

"I get it," Gabe said. "But you don't know me very well. I don't give up. Not ever. There was no danger of that. Not for my family."

Justice nodded. "Maybe I'm just giving voice to my own weakness, because it did seem impossible."

Keegan nodded. "Jesus wouldn't ask us to do something that's not possible. It just requires a little bit of faith, but unlike my son, mine was wavering. I'm glad I was outside, fighting bad guys that I could see."

Justice blinked up at him. "Oh yeah, I haven't heard about what happened on the outside."

"You will. It was a mess. We had some MS13 gang members ride up on us. We had some plain old street punks come up on us. We put down, detained and arrested eleven men and two women, all who tried to take us out and get into the house. Besides that, the whole town was out watching and looking around trying to figure out if they really were experiencing an earthquake."

"Oh, wow," Justice said. "So, the shaking, it wasn't just inside the house. Others felt it too?"

"Yes, and it actually registered on USGS. A 2.2 and several smaller aftershocks."

"I'm glad I didn't know that," Justice said. "I mean, demons that are strong enough to move the earth? That would mess with my head."

Gabe smiled. "Being picked up and thrown against a ceiling wasn't scary enough to mess with your head?"

Justice chuckled. "Well, I guess I was focused on the pain and it pissed me off." He glanced at Keegan. "Sorry, I mean, it made me mad."

Keegan chuckled. "I know what you meant."

Gabe laughed. "Ya know my dad's a Marine. He's heard and said a whole lot worse than that."

Justice smiled. "Well, I'm gonna head into see Lily."

Keegan nodded. "So, *are* you two engaged?"

"Engaged? Oh! No sir."

"Okay, well, I'm just asking because that's how it just now sounded on the last part of that video."

Justice shook his head. "Um, you need to hear the whole thing. So, no, we're not engaged— yet. I haven't had a chance to speak to you and Mrs. Tanner about it. And I know Lily and I haven't known each other very long. Still, I believe we're supposed to be together. You yourself said as much the first day I met you. You said, 'the answer is right in front of your eyes.' And, it was and my eyes are open now. And like I told those demons, she's mine." He looked into the man's eyes. "How could anyone not love Lily? How could anyone not give his life to have her? I would, because she's become everything to me, well, other than God, of course. I love her, Mr. Tanner."

Keegan smiled. "Justice, hold on. You had me at 'we're supposed to be together.' You're a good man, Justice. And when you talk to Elizabeth and I, I'm sure you'll have a positive answer."

Justice grinned. “Thank you, sir. Thank you.”

“Don’t wait too long,” Gabe said. “I’d do it right away if I were you. Or, if not, then wait until, like, June.”

“Why June?”

Keegan laughed. “He’s trying to get you to do it while he’s here.”

Justice smiled. “Well, I don’t know about all that. I have some thinking and praying to do.” He smiled. “Hey, but on another subject, I have to say, Gabriel Tanner, you have more than measured up to all the hype that surrounds you. You do not disappoint.”

Gabe sighed. “Awww, go on.”

Justice laughed and drew a deep breath. “Well, I’m anxious to go see my girl.”

Keegan nodded. “Go. She’s anxious to see you.”

✝✝✝

Justice stopped at the threshold of Lily’s room, closed his eyes, said a quick prayer and peeked in. He smiled. The head of her bed was raised up and she was sitting prettily there, her blanket folded neatly at her waist, and she seemed to be sound asleep. He came quietly into the room and stood next to the bed. His heart felt so full. They made it past this huge obstacle. She was alive. She was whole. She was his. He was grateful, elated, rapturous. It was the first time he’d ever felt this way about a girl.

Silently moving forward he came close to the bed, leaned over and kissed her forehead, then stood back and watched as her eyes fluttered open.

“Oh! Justice, you’re finally here!” she said reaching her hands up to him.

He leaned over and hugged her, pulled slightly away, looked deeply into her eyes and then gently ran his fingers over her face. “And there you are,” he said softly. “Alive, smiling, talking. I cannot tell you how grateful and relieved I am. Oh, Lily, when I thought you were dying, I wanted to die too.”

Her eyes filled. “I’m sorry, Justice. I’m sorry you had to go through that. I’m sorry I caused you pain.”

He gave a soft groan and hugged her tightly, then pulled away and looked into her eyes, a bit of humor in his. “Good. You should be, and don’t you ever put me through that again. Never. You are not allowed to be sick or injured. Not ever again. That is my new rule. Will you obey me?”

She giggled. “I’ll try very hard.”

He cupped her face in both his hands and leaned forward and kissed one cheek, and then the other cheek and then softly kissed her lips and pulled back again so he could see her whole face. “I love you, Lily Tanner.”

She smiled brightly. “Oh, I love you too, Justice Sawyer. I really do and it makes me so happy to be able to say that.” She reached up and touched his face. “You’re all scratched up.”

“Yeah, it was a battle, but we won. The scratches are because the bad guys broke all the windows except our new front window, and the shards of glass were swirling all around us in the air, like an indoor tornado, battering every inch of exposed skin. It was crazy.”

Lily shook her head in wonder. “Gabe says you stepped up and saved the day. He

says they threw you all over the place."

Justice smiled. "Yeah, they weren't too pleased with me. But they pissed me off. They said that you and Iris were theirs and I screamed at them and told them you both were mine and God's, and they couldn't have you. And even if they succeeded in taking your lives, you and Iris would still belong to God and you would be there in Jesus' arms forever and that there was no way the bad guys would ever have you. Not ever. So, I pissed them off too, and that's when they decided to throw me around. It wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't already thrown the metal chandelier in the dining room at your brother. But when they did that, it left a jagged metal piece hanging from the ceiling and they threw me up against it and like, stabbed me in the back."

Lily's eyes opened wide. "Stabbed you? Are you okay?"

He shrugged and moved his shoulder around a bit. "Well, I just got eleven stitches in my back above my left shoulder blade, but I'm alive and well and my organs are all whole, so, there's that."

"Eleven stitches? That's a lot!"

"Naw, it's not that bad."

"Take off your shirt and turn around," Lily said firmly.

Justice started to argue with her but smiled at her look of determination.

He stepped back, drew his shirt over his head and turned around. He smiled when he heard her say what he knew she would say.

"Well, I can't see it because it has a bandage over it."

He chuckled. "Yep, and I'm not gonna take the bandage off."

She giggled and reached out and touched his back. "Come closer."

He backed up and felt her press her cool hand against his back.

"Please heal him, in Jesus' name," she said softly.

"Amen," he answered and turned back around.

She gazed at his muscular chest and his abs and then met his eyes and she blushed. He grabbed his shirt and pulled it over his head.

She smiled and sighed. "I don't get to go home until tomorrow."

"I know. But I'm here. I'll stay with you all night."

"You will!" she said excitedly like a little kid who'd just been promised an ice cream cone.

He chuckled. "Yes, of course. I thought I'd lost you. I thought I'd never see you alive again. I thought I was gonna have to wait through a lifetime to see you again. I'm staying right here."

She reached out and took his hand. He squeezed hers affectionately and then got serious.

"I listened to the little 'goodbye' video you made."

Her cheeks turned pink.

He smiled. "Don't be embarrassed. If you had passed, it would be big comfort to me. Instead, it's a big push in the direction we want to take this relationship. You love me. I love you. We should get married and be together and have a house full of kids and be ecstatically happy forever."

Eyes wide, she smiled at him. “Is that a proposal?”

He frowned. “Well, not a formal one. I just promised your father that I would come to him and your mom first and get their blessing.”

“Oh really? How did that conversation come about?”

“Well, your dad and Gabe came in at the end of me listening to the video you made, and your dad asked me if you and I were engaged and I told him not yet, and that I would ask him for his blessing first, and then I told him it’s not an ‘if’, but a ‘when’, and he told me that when I did come to him, he would give us his blessing. And then your brother told me to do it right away or wait until June, because he wanted to be around when I proposed, I assume because he missed your sisters getting engaged. He was just being silly, but I had all these crazy thoughts running through my mind that maybe I should just do it. But I don’t want it to be rushed or unplanned or haphazard. I want to do it right. Still, I’m thinking, why not a little pre-proposal.”

“Pre-proposal?”

He smiled and nodded and leaned close. “Yeah. Like, why not a little personal, secret proposal, just between you and me. Lily, I am absolutely certain that God brought us together, that it was preplanned, maybe before we were born. You told me you were drawn to that house since you were a little kid. That sounds like a sign. The enemy has worked very hard to make sure our family doesn’t continue. To me, that means you and I, Lily, are going to make a huge difference in the world. I’m not sure how or what we will do. Or, maybe it won’t even be us, maybe it will be our children, if the world stays around that long. Still, sweet Lily, my girl, my beautiful woman of God, until the world ends and Jesus comes, you and I— I would like us to do everything and all that we can to bring a family of light to this world.

“Your father and mother have done just that. They’ve set the example of how it’s done. What can you and I create together, baby? Just think of the love... our home would be filled with it. Filled to bursting. I love you, Lily Tanner and I want to spend an eternity with you. I promise to try to get better every day, to be a better man tomorrow than I was today. I promise I won’t break our wedding vows and make you hate me. I promise to learn and grow every day and I promise I will love God, honor God, be faithful to Him forever. I will never turn my back on Him, which means, I will never turn my back on you.”

Lily sniffed.

He stopped talking for a few seconds and smiled at her emotional response before he went on. “Lily, I will get stronger. I will protect you. I will provide for you. I will love you. Oh, how I will love you. I know we haven’t known each other for very long, but people keep telling me that when you know, you know. And so, Lily Tanner, will you marry me?”

She wiped at the moisture in her eyes and sniffed and smiled sweetly. “Justice, that was beautiful. How in the world could I be so blessed to have such a fine man of God want little old me.”

He rolled his eyes, because she truly had no idea what a catch she was.

“Justice, I am so in love with you and you really don’t even need to ask. Of course

I will marry you. I thought maybe I would be the old maid auntie to all of my sisters' and my brother's children."

"Yeah, I remember you mentioned that the other day and it's still just as ridiculous as ever."

She shrugged.

He sighed. "Well, that was the enemy talking, trying to discourage you."

She nodded. "And so, to defy that enemy, I WILL marry you, Justice, whenever you want, wherever you want. But don't get me wrong. I do want to defy the enemy but I want to marry you because I am so in love with you I think my heart might burst. I wanted to find someone who would be like my father; strong, protective, close to God, loving, smart, good with children, calm, even when angry, humble, confident. You're just like him and you're like my sister's fiancés and I can't believe that I'm so blessed to be the one you want."

He shook his head. "We're gonna have to work on that self-esteem issue, Lily. I want you to know just how amazing and how wonderful you are and worthy you are to be loved and cared for and protected."

She sighed. "It's not as bad as I make it seem. I have confidence. I am worthy. And I'm grateful, Justice. I'm so grateful you came to Pine Forest."

"Me too. Now, I'm gonna go out and let your sister come back here to say goodnight to you and then I'll be back with some good food and we'll eat and you and I can talk all night about our secret plans."

"What plans?"

"When to propose. When to marry. Where to marry. Where to live. How many children. What color to paint the nursery. What flowers to plant in the yard. Cats or dogs, or both. Where to honeymoon." He stopped and shrugged. "That's just off the top of my head."

She giggled. "Sounds like a fun night.

He moved closer. "How do I keep myself from buying her gifts and spoiling her rotten? How many kisses are too many in a day? How many times to make love each night?" He sighed. "So many questions to find the answers to."

Lily blushed. "I'm looking forward to finding the answers."

✝✝✝

Out in the waiting room, Justice found only an Ameritech agent whom he didn't know, and Daisy.

"Justice Sawyer," Daisy began, "this is Agent Morris. He was assigned to come and watch over Lily tonight."

Justice nodded and shook his hand. "Agent Morris, nice to meet you." He turned to Daisy. "Violet and CJ have left for the day?"

Daisy nodded. "Yes. Violet is totally exhausted after the ordeal and CJ took her home. That's why Agent Morris has been assigned, just for tonight. And Cam and Dr. Kino dropped little Eli off with Aunt Jodi and have gone up to Atlanta to check in on Iris."

"Hmm, that's a long day for them."

Daisy nodded. “I told them that, but they promised they wouldn’t stay up there too long and would come back to the Inn and crash and maybe even sleep in tomorrow morning.”

Justice laughed. “Sounds like a great idea. So, I came out here to send you in to say goodnight to your sister. I’m gonna get her some decent food and I’ll be right back and then I intend to stay with her all night.”

“Oh,” Daisy said with a smile. “Oh, well then, isn’t that nice.”

Justice grinned. “It’s more than nice. And that means you can go home and get some good food and some rest because I’m sure you’re tired too.”

“I am, but I was willing to stay with Lily, because, well, she’s my sister and I thought I’d lost her today.”

Justice smiled. “Oh how I know just what you’re feeling.”

Daisy looked him over. “You love my sister, don’t you?”

“Yes. Absolutely, positively yes. And that will be the subject she and I will talk about all night tonight.”

Daisy nodded. “Okay then. I’ll allow it.”

The three people turned when another person walked into the waiting room.

Daisy’s eyes opened wide. “Brody? What in the world are you doing here?” she exclaimed as she moved forward and fell against his chest.

He laughed softly and held her tight as the sobs erupted. He rubbed his hand over her back and then patted her gently. “Lily and Iris were on their deathbeds and I needed to be here for you, Daisy. I got special permission to leave. I got the first flight out and just made it into Atlanta an hour ago.”

Daisy sniffed and looked up. “Oh, Brody, I’m so glad you’re here. I thought I was being strong, but the moment I saw you, I realized how much I needed you.” She laid her head back on his chest and cried.

“Shh, now, Daisy girl. I got you. I’m sorry it took me so long to get here. I’m sorry I live so far away from you. Shh, now, baby.”

She sniffed and looked up. “Lily and Iris are gonna be okay.”

He nodded. “I called your father the minute we landed and he told me what happened. It’s so hard to believe what went down. And he told me that you were being so strong for your sister and for your mother who’s been desperately worried about you.”

“We? You said ‘the minute we landed’?”

“Oh, yeah, Dad and Mom and Gracie are here too. You Tanners are like family and we couldn’t NOT be here for you.”

She sniffed again and then remembered two other people were in the room. Pushing away from him, she smiled timorously and pointed at Agent Morris. “Um, this is Agent Morris, he’s been assigned to watch over Lily tonight. Agent, this is Brody Smith.”

Brody nodded and shook the agent’s hand. “Agent Morris, nice to meet you and thank you for your service.”

“You as well and my pleasure,” he answered.

Daisy touched Justice’s shoulder. “And this is Justice Sawyer who is Lily’s new

guy."

Justice smiled and shook Brody's hand. "Nice to meet you. So, you are Toby Nash's and Caroline Smith's son, right?"

Brody nodded. "I am."

Justice smiled. "And Gracie Nash's brother."

Brody nodded again. "Right again."

"I didn't want to leave her out," Justice said with a grin. "I've heard all about you. You're the number one MLB draft pick in the nation."

"Um, number three right now. We'll see."

"Well, I've watched a highlight reel from your college career and you are awesome and I'm honored to meet you."

Brody smiled. "Thank you so much. Though none of that means anything if I don't produce this season."

"I'm sure you'll produce," Justice said.

"Thanks."

"So, I'm about to go get Lily some food that doesn't suck. Anybody want anything?"

Brody looked at Daisy. "I'm hoping to talk my girl into going with me to get something to eat."

Daisy smiled. "A little while ago I would've told you 'no.' But Justice has just informed me that he's staying with Lily all night, so, yeah, I'll go with you. Where are you guys staying?"

"Well, the Inn was full, so Ricky Kino invited us all to stay at the 'Kino Plantation Home.'"

Daisy smiled. "Oooh, you get to stay at the fancy place. Just be careful if you go walking on the property."

Brody laughed. "I will. I learned my lesson."

"Okay, then, I'm gonna take off," Justice said. "Agent Morris, I know you'll tell me that you don't need anything to eat, but I'm gonna bring you back a meal anyway."

"It's not necessary sir."

"Yes, I know. Still, see you soon. Brody, nice to meet you and I'm sure I'll see you again. Daisy, see you tomorrow."

Justice took his leave and Daisy smiled at Brody. "Well, I wanted to go say goodnight to Lily. Would you like to come back and see her a minute?"

He nodded. "I would love that."

✝✝✝

Genesis 22:10-18

"Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He

went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide.

And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.” The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.””

Chapter Thirty

Still January 30th, 5:00 PM Thursday Early Evening
Children's Hospital, Atlanta, Georgia

During the hour long drive, Gabe took advantage of it by first calling Taylor. She already knew the good news, but was very happy and exuberant to share the moment with Gabe. They talked together, cried together and prayed together as Keegan quietly listened.

When that conversation was finished, Gabe went live on his website and gave a mini version of what went down, promising a more in detail story later. He was very careful how he worded things because he knew some very young people listened to his ministry and he didn't want to frighten them. It had to be done carefully. The story needed to be told, because even young people needed to know how real the enemy is, but he also had to differentiate between adult content and PG content.

The moment Keegan and Gabe walked into the special waiting room, Rose and Heather rushed forward, not quite suppressing their squeals of joy.

Heather was immediately enfolded in her father's arms and Rose practically tackled Gabe. It took several moments before they switched places and went through the process again. There were tears and kisses on the cheeks and fierce hugs and finally the girls stepped back. Keegan and Gabe both heartily shook hands with Jericho and Nolan and then hugged Jodi, who'd come to support Lizzy.

"Jodi," Keegan said. "Your friendship with my wife means the world to her. Thank you so much for being here for her."

"You don't have to thank me, Keegan. I love Lizzy. I always have."

Keegan smiled. "I know. And I get it. Me too."

"Sir," Nolan began. "I can't tell you how good it is to see you and Gabe. I mean, Jericho and I, we've been doing all we can to hold everyone together, but the power and strength that just walked through that door, it's palpable and I'm just so grateful that you're here."

Keegan smiled and nodded. "Well, Gabe and I are grateful to the both of you. We knew we could depend on you to take care of things."

Jericho shook his head. "Your wife, Mr. Tanner, she's the strongest woman I've ever known. Now I know where Rose gets it."

Keegan smiled at his daughter. "Rose has always been strong and yeah, so has Lizzy. And so has Heather for that matter. Actually, I'm surrounded by six very strong women. But thanks guys, for taking care of business." He looked at the girls. "So, is Iris still doing well?"

"She is. Mom is in with her right now," Heather said.

Rose nodded. "But please go on in. They are both so anxious to see both of you.

You can tell us all about how things went down later."

Keegan nodded, put his arm around Gabe. "Show us the way, Rose."

She led them down to Iris' room, nodding at a few of the nurses as they went. She stood at the door and watched the beautiful scene. It was Iris who saw them as they approached.

"Gabe! Gabe!" Iris screamed.

Lizzy looked up and stood, a smile blooming across her face.

Gabe went immediately to his sister and she stood on the bed and jumped into his arms. He caught her and sat down on the side of the bed and held her tight, his eyes closing as tears of gratitude welled over.

Meanwhile, Keegan went to his wife. She looked up at him as he approached and the tears formed in her eyes too. She leaned forward and Keegan pressed her to his chest, holding her tight, smoothing his hand over her hair. She broke down and he held her close.

Iris looked up and put her little hands on each of Gabe's cheeks. "Why is you cwying, Gabe? I not sick anymore. Don't be sad, Gabe. It's okay."

He sniffed. "I'm not sad, my little flower. I'm crying because I'm so happy that you're well. So so so so happy," he added with a laugh.

Gabe glanced over his shoulder at his parents. His mother was sobbing. He figured she'd been strong long enough and now that his dad was here, she could let go. His heart swelled with love and compassion for his strong mother and love and respect for his strong father.

"Gabe, you have boo boos on yo face."

"I know."

"Here is one, and here is one, and wight here, and wight here," she said as she tried to count all of the scratches and cuts.

Patiently, Gabe allowed her to count his wounds.

Finally Lizzy lifted her head from her husband's chest, wiped at her tears and smiled into his eyes. "I'm so happy."

He chuckled. "Me too. Let me go say hello to my baby girl."

Lizzy nodded and shoved him away and held her arms out to her son.

Gabe came to hug his mother and Keegan headed to his daughter's bedside. "Hello my little flower," he said softly.

She jumped into his arms. "Daddy, I missed you and Mommy cwied for you to come and see her."

"She did?"

"Yeah, because I saw her cwy one time when I opened my eyes when I was sick. But I'm not sick anymore, Daddy. I feel aaaallll better!"

Keegan smiled. "I'm so glad you feel better. I was worried about you."

"You were?"

"Yes of course. You're my little girl, my little flower and I don't like it when you're sick."

"I don't wike to be sick, but Jesus said I was gonna be okay."

They all got silent and looked at her.

"You spoke to Jesus?" Keegan asked softly.

"Yes and He is so so so so nice and He told me dat you and Gabe was gonna make some bad guys go away and dat when you do, den the sickness will go away, and He made my head stop hurting for me so I wouldn't feel so bad and He said He would stay wif me while I was sweeping. And Jesus said dat you and Gabe was weally stwong and dat He was vewy um, vewy, um, I can't bemember the word, but it meant He was pwoud of you."

Gabe smiled at his sister. "Did Jesus say He was 'pleased' with us?"

Iris' eyes opened wide. "Yes! Dat was it! Pweased."

Gabe's eyes teared.

Keegan smiled. "That is a really nice thing for Jesus to say," he explained to Iris. "Because we all want so much to *please* Jesus. We want to do God's will all the time. That means we want to do what God wants us to do and not what we want to do, and if we do that, it *pleases* Him."

"I want to pwease Jesus too," she said.

Gabe shook his head from spiritual overload and wiped at his eyes.

"Well, I'm sorry, but there are too many people in this room," a nurse said kindly as she came in the door.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Lizzy said. "My husband and son are staying and I'm gonna leave. Let me just say goodbye to Iris."

The nurse smiled and nodded. "I'll be right back."

Lizzy hugged and kissed her daughter. "My sweetie pie, I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

Iris nodded. "In da morning?"

"Yes ma'am. They just want to watch you and make sure you really are okay and then they'll release you in the morning."

"And then I can see my whoooooole famwy. I miss Viwet and Daisy."

"You don't miss Rose and Heather?"

Iris giggled. "I just saw dem."

"You don't miss Lily?"

Iris giggled. "No, cuz I just saw her too."

"You did?"

"Yes, she was wif Jesus too and we hugged."

They all had to choke back their emotions.

"And I weally weally miss da babies."

"I do too," Lizzy said with a nod. "And I'm gonna go get them from Aunt Lisa and nurse them and kiss them and hug them."

"Will you kiss dem fwom me too?"

"I sure will. How many times?"

"Ummm, a hundwed!"

"You got it, sweet girl," Lizzy chirped.

Keegan walked Lizzy to the door. "You're riding with Heather and Nolan?"

"Yes, because Rose came in Jericho's truck."

"I love you, Elizabeth," he said softly.

"I love you, Keegan. Thank you for taking such good care of us. And thank you for helping to save our girls."

He frowned but nodded. "I did what I could. I don't even know all that happened inside the house yet. But there's video and I'm looking forward to seeing it. I've been told that Gabe and Justice really stepped it up."

"Were you not inside the house?"

"No. I was stationed outside in case any earthly bad guys tried to stop us and get inside the house."

"Oh, and so, did anyone try?"

"Oh yes."

She frowned. "Did you have to kill anyone?"

"Well, honey, thankfully not this time, but I fought quite a few and about a dozen were arrested. Fun times."

Lizzy smiled.

Keegan ran a hand over her face. "You're tired, honey. Go home. Kiss the babies, get some sleep."

She nodded. "I'm exhausted. Good night, Keegan."

He kissed her. "Good night, Elizabeth."

✝✝✝

Everyone had headed home, while Keegan and Gabe made themselves comfortable in Iris' little room. The outcome could have been so very different. It could be that they were headed home with thoughts of planning a couple of funerals. Instead, there was gratitude and relief and joy, celebrated in a weary, spent, kind of way.

Currently Keegan sat in the chair by the bed and Gabe sat in the bed with Iris in his lap. They spoke softly until Gabe's stomach rumbled.

Keegan smiled. "I guess you're hungry."

Gabe nodded. "I guess I am. I didn't even think about it until just now."

"I is hungwy too," Iris proclaimed.

"I think the nurse said your dinner is coming," Keegan said.

She made a face. "I don't wike dey cookin'."

Gabe smiled. "If you could have any kind of food in the whole world what would you want right now?"

Iris stood on the bed and turned to face Gabe with her hands on his shoulders and jumped up and down chanting loudly, "Birthday cake. Birthday cake. Birthday cake wif chocowate ice cweam. I want some riiight now!" she yelled.

"Oh yeah," Gabe yelled back. "You don't get cake, you get a tickle!"

Iris squealed in delight, until a nurse poked her head in and she wasn't smiling this time.

The new night nurse came in with a frown. "Excuse me, but I'm going to need for you to keep your voices down. You know there are other people in this unit who

are very ill, one the very next room down and you are being rude."

Keegan stood. "You're right and we are so sorry. We'll do better. They got a little carried away. They're just happy that a few hours ago, Iris was going to die, and now, miraculously, she's completely well."

The nurse still didn't smile. "Well, unfortunately, that's not happening for the others here, so please be respectful."

Keegan nodded. "Of course, you're right. Again, I apologize."

Gabe set Iris down and got off the bed. "Ma'am? Um, how old is the sick child who is one room down?"

"She's four," the nurse answered haughtily.

Gabe walked toward the door.

"Gabe where is you goin'?" Iris asked in an exaggerated whisper.

"I'm gonna go see the little girl next door. Stay here. I'll be back."

Gabe walked past the nurse and headed down to the next room. Keegan lifted Iris in his arms and stood in the doorway and watched his son walk down to the next room with the nurse chasing right behind.

"I'm sorry young man, but you can't go in there," the nurse barked. "If you don't stop I'll have to get security."

Gabe ignored her. He came to the open door and looked in. He saw a child on life support, her mother, Gabe guessed, sitting next to her holding her hand and her father standing off to the side of the bed. The man looked at Gabe when he came to the door.

Gabe nodded at him. "I'm sorry sir, I don't mean to interrupt, but God just healed my little sister a few hours ago. Completely healed her."

"How nice for you," the mother said bitterly.

Gabe sighed. "Yes, but, I mean, I'm sorry, but I feel like God just told me to come in here and pray for your little girl."

The man glanced questioningly over at his wife. The wife glared up at Gabe. "We don't believe in all of that crap."

Gabe nodded. "I know. I understand. But my sister was healed. That's a fact." Gabe looked at the nurse who was scowling at him. "Tell them."

The nurse sighed. "Yes, she was not expected to make it and suddenly, the illness simply disappeared. It was advanced meningitis. We're not sure how it all came about."

"Well, I'm sure," Gabe said.

"I don't want you praying over my daughter," the woman spat. "Now leave this room."

Gabe looked to the man. "Sir. It couldn't hurt. Please. Jesus is telling me very loudly to pray for your daughter."

The man sighed. "We're not a religious family."

Gabe nodded. "I get that, and I don't have a religion, but I DO have a relationship with Jesus. He's real and He wants to heal your daughter," Gabe blurted out before he could stop himself. He hoped it was true. He was pretty sure that's

what Jesus was telling him.

The man looked to his wife again and Gabe heard loudly the words Jesus wanted him to speak. He took a deep breath. “Sir, you need to rise up and be a man,” Gabe began. “Stop looking to your wife for permission. This child is yours too, correct? A man is supposed to lead his family and teach them about God. Here’s your chance. It’s time, sir. Jesus said to tell you that the time is now.”

“How dare you,” the woman said as she rose.

“Julie, stop,” the man said. “What could it hurt? And more importantly, what if it helps?”

“I will not have some stranger...”

“I rebuke that,” Gabe said suddenly, surprising himself as well as the nurse and the parents. He swallowed hard. “It’ll only take a minute. I promise, ma’am, sir, just one minute,” Gabe pleaded, directing his gaze at the man.

The man nodded. “Come in. Go ahead.”

The woman gasped.

Gabe came quickly to the bed. “What does she have?”

“She has respiratory failure due to encephalitis, and she’s not responding to the medications,” the father said quickly.

Gabe wasn’t sure what all that meant, but he nodded and placed his hand on the child’s shoulder, then looked into the father’s eyes. “When your child is well, remember that Jesus healed her. Remember that He is real. And remember that He loves you all deeply and completely.”

Gabe closed his eyes and prayed a quick prayer. “Father, I’m doing what You told me to do. Please heal this little girl of everything that is causing her problems. Make everything well, make everything work. Lord, rebuke this evil that wants to take this child. Rebuke this evil that wants to keep You from healing her. You just told me it’s not her time to go and so in the name of Jesus, I rebuke this darkness. Leave this child. Emma, be well. Complete. Whole. Well. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Gabe opened his eyes and stepped back, breathing hard. He looked up at the man and nodded.

“How did you know her name is Emma?” he asked.

Gabe’s brow furrowed. “Oh, I, uh, didn’t. The name just popped out.” He shrugged and smiled. “Jesus likes to do stuff like that. Anyway, sir, she’s gonna be fine. Rest assured.” He glanced over at the woman. “I’m done. I’ll, uh, leave now.”

The woman glared at the nurse. “Are you gonna just stand there. I want something done about this.”

Gabe walked toward the door but stopped when Jeffy appeared.

“Oh! Hello, Dr. Kino Wallace,” he said loudly.

The nurse gasped and turned. “Oh, Dr. Wallace! I didn’t know you were coming back.”

Jeffy smiled sweetly. “I didn’t know I was either. I decided to come back to check on Iris Tanner, but then I was told that her brother had come down the hall to see someone, so, here I am.”

"Well, Doctor Santiago will want to know you're here. I'll go tell him," the nurse hurried off.

Jeffy nodded. "Good idea."

"Dr. Kino?" the man said.

"Yes," Jeffy said kindly.

"THE Nobel Prize winning Dr. Kino?" the woman said.

"Yes, though that's the least of my achievements," she replied glibly.

She smiled at Gabe. "Hello Gabriel. So you felt compelled to come down and see these people, huh?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Do you two know each other?" the man asked.

"Oh, yes, our families are very close friends."

The woman frowned. "Well, he came and barged his way in here and..."

"He didn't barge his way in," the father said. "He asked if he could come in and pray for our daughter."

Jeffy nodded. "I see. And your wife didn't want him to and you allowed it. Good man," she added quickly.

Gabe smiled.

"He said she would be healed," the man said softly.

Jeffy nodded. "Then she will be. May I examine her for just a few seconds?"

"Yes, please do," the woman said quickly, and motioned her toward the bed. "Maybe you can practice some real medicine."

Jeffy sighed and opened the young girl's eyelids and looked into her eyes. She closed her eyes and laid her hand on the girl's forehead and smiled. "Well, she has encephalitis and she hasn't been responding to the viral medications and it is indeed a viral infection causing the brain swelling." Jeffy turned and smiled kindly at the mother.

The woman looked at Jeffy in disbelief. "That's the correct diagnosis. You can tell all that by just looking in her eyes?"

"Well, that's not all I did, but I can tell."

Gabe spoke up. "Jeffy, I mean, Dr. Kino is a gifted doctor."

The woman pressed her lips tightly together. Jeffy placed a hand on the woman's arm. "There was a resistance, however, she is beginning to respond now that Gabe has prayed for her. By morning, she should be on the road to recovery."

The woman's mouth fell open.

"There will be no after affects. Neither physical or behavioral. No brain damage. No speech, memory, vision or cognitive decline."

"How can you know that?" the woman asked.

"I just do. Trust me. Or don't. It really makes no difference, because she's not being healed by your faith, but by Gabe's. Still, remember what I just said later, when the doctors are surprised by her sudden rally."

The father stepped forward. "Thank you, Dr. Kino," he said, shaking her hand. He then offered his hand to Gabe. And thank you, young man. What is your name

again?”

“I’m Gabe Tanner.”

“Well, Gabe, thank you so much.”

“It was my pleasure.”

Jeffy smiled. “Gabe?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Anywhere else you feel we need to go pray for someone?”

Gabe nodded. “Yes. I think the ground floor the trauma center, and then I think the seventh floor.”

“Let’s go,” Jeffy said brightly.

They turned and left the ICU room. Cam waited just outside the door.

“That was interesting,” he said.

“Wait until I tell you everything,” Jeffy replied. “Gabe told the father to stand up and be a man.”

Gabe glanced at Jeffy because she hadn’t been in there at that time.

They headed down to the ground floor. In the elevator Gabe smiled at Jeffy. “That lady didn’t like me too much. Especially when I told her husband to stand up to her.”

Jeffy giggled. “That was awesome.”

“So, you heard?”

“Not with my ears, but yes. And Gabe, you’re getting much stronger.”

“I don’t know about that, but I think people don’t like being talked to by a kid. I guess I need to learn how to be less um, confrontational?”

Jeffy shrugged and Cam put in his two cents worth.

“No, I don’t think so, Gabe. I think you need to know the power you have and go with complete confidence.”

Gabe sighed.

“Like you did when you saved Commander Edwards from that bomb. You went with complete confidence. Remember that.”

Gabe nodded and Jeffy smiled.

✝✝✝

The trio made it down to the ground floor and headed straight to the Emergency Trauma Center. Gabe wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but Jeffy seemed to know.

“Excuse me, Doctor Allen?”

The man who’d been hurrying by stopped. “Yes. Can I help you?”

“I’m Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace.”

His eyes opened wide. “Oh, Dr. Wallace, I heard you were here yesterday. You look very young. Dr. Wallace, I’m in a bit of a hurry, but...”

“Is there a nine-year-old boy that was brought in recently?”

He stopped. “Yes and he’s probably not gonna make it. That’s where...”

“May I see him?”

“He’s being prepped for...”

"I know. Please. Just for one minute."

"Well, of course, but..."

"Thank you," she said and headed straight to the correct station, Dr. Allen tagging along behind.

Jeffy stepped inside the room. Gabe stayed off to the side, trying to be invisible so they wouldn't tell him to leave. Cam stayed just outside the door. Gabe felt a little sick at what he was seeing. The boy was covered in blood. He was making moaning sounds. Jeffy went straight to him, put her hands on his chest. "Hit by a car, his right arm and right leg are broken, his right lung is collapsed, severe head trauma."

Doctor Allen nodded. "Yes, we're about to take him into surgery."

Jeffy nodded and then turned to Gabe. "Gabe? Do it."

Gabe moved forward quickly before anyone could tell him to stop, laid his hands on the boys chest and bowed his head. "Be healed, be whole. Broken bones mended, bleeding stopped, head and brain, healed, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' mighty name, be healed." He stopped a minute and nodded. "Thank you. Thank you," he said as he was overcome with emotion. He backed away toward the corner, again trying to make himself part of the background.

Dr. Allen frowned and moved forward. "What's goin' on?"

"Oh, sorry, I had to act quickly. We just wanted to quickly pray for this boy. I didn't see any parents standing around."

"His parent's are on the way to the hospital. Do you know this boy?"

Jeffy smiled. "I do."

The man nodded. "Dr. Kino, would you like come into the OR?"

"Oh, well, thank you so much for the offer, but you have no need for me now. His brain is fine. I think when you get in there, you'll see he is just fine. Before you open him up though, I suggest you redo the CT scan of his brain and lungs and the X-rays of his right arm and leg."

"Why? Do you think there was a mistake made?"

"No. I think we've just witnessed a miracle."

The doctor looked the boy over. He'd immediately stopped moaning. He was lying peacefully. The huge bulge that had been visible on his right arm was gone. The gash on the side of his head appeared smaller and was currently not bleeding. Dr. Allen frowned in confusion.

Jeffy smiled at him. "Dr. Allen, I know that you know that sometimes miracles occur. One has. Go with it. We have to leave."

"Oh, there you are, Dr. Kino," Dr. Santiago said as he entered the room, his eyes smiling at Dr. Kino. He turned to the ER doctor. "Dr. Allen, do we have an important case down here?"

"Well, sir, we did, but Dr. Kino is saying to redo the tests."

Dr. Santiago, who was over neurological conditions in the hospital, nodded. "There was brain trauma?"

"Yes sir."

Jeffy smiled. "I don't mess around. I'm quite serious about brain injury as you

know. Redo the tests before you operate." She smiled at Dr. Santiago. "Well, I have to go upstairs and see another friend on the seventh floor."

"Oncology?" Santiago questioned.

Jeffy nodded. "Yes. They say she might not make it through the night."

Santiago nodded. "May I tag along? I might learn something."

Jeffy nodded. "You may of course, since you work at this hospital. But be warned, we have every intention of praying over this girl."

"We?" the doctor asked.

Jeffy nodded and motioned toward Gabe. "Yes. My good buddy here, Gabe Tanner and I, we are about to go on a tour of this place and pray over the ones God directs us to pray over."

"Uh, well, that's a nice thought, Dr. Kino, but parent's must give permission."

"I understand, but we only need one parent's permission," she said quickly, in case he was making a reference to what happened up in ICU.

The doctor glanced at his watch. "Well, it is getting late and my wife is waiting for me at home. Maybe I'll just go along to this one cancer patient."

Jeffy nodded. "Suit yourself."

They headed up to the seventh floor. Jeffy led them straight to another ICU especially for cancer patients. It was a six-year-old Hispanic girl with leukemia. When they walked in the mother was there with her child.

Jeffy immediately shook her head with a sigh and then looked at the woman. "Hello," Jeffy said softly.

The woman only nodded.

Jeffy smiled kindly and spoke in Spanish. "I'm Dr. Kino Wallace. Is this your daughter?"

The woman smiled. "Si, Senora and she's not doing very well," she replied, also in Spanish.

Jeffy nodded and took the child's hand in her own, then laid a hand on the side of her head. "I can see that. She has acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Her organs are failing. Her heart is giving out. Her blood platelets are very low. What have they told you?"

The woman's eyes filled with tears. "They say she is failing, she is dying. I've called my husband and he's trying to get here."

"Trying?"

"Si, we don't have a car and we live out in Conyers."

"Conyers?" She looked at Gabe and spoke in English. "Where's Conyers, Georgia?"

"Um, that's east of Atlanta, probably about thirty miles out."

Jeffy nodded. "Ma'am, does your husband have a phone?"

"Oh, si, he does."

"Cam?" Jeffy called softly.

Cam poked his head inside the room. "Yes ma'am?"

She spoke to him in Spanish so the woman could understand what she was

saying. “Will you get her husband on the phone and tell him we’re sending a car to pick him up? Arrange childcare for their other children. Arrange food. Take care of...”

“I got it, babe,” he said.

She smiled and then got the woman’s information and relayed it to Cam who went to work.

Jeffy turned to Dr. Santiago. “Doctor, by any chance have you read the books I published on curing cancers?”

“Actually, I have, Dr. Kino. However, implementing your protocols has been a bit of an uphill battle.”

Jeffy nodded. “Oh, how I know. And I do understand. Still, you do understand how chemotherapy only exacerbates the illness? It’s the chemo that’s killing her. Do not give her another dose.”

“But, I’ll have to speak with ...”

“Not another dose. I put my life in jeopardy to bring those protocols to light and anyone who has practiced them has seen amazing results. Will you trust me? Not another dose. Overrule her doctors. I can make a very big stink about this. Very—big!”

He nodded. “I’ll do everything I can.”

Jeffy turned back to Mrs. Flores. “Now, dear lady, I would like to ask your permission for my friend and I to pray over your daughter.”

Mrs. Flores smiled and nodded. “Si, please do.”

“This is Gabriel. He’s going to pray. Do you understand English or shall I interpret for you?”

“I can understand.”

“Good. Gabe?”

Gabe moved forward and laid his hands on the child’s head. Jeffy laid her hand on the child’s shoulder and then took the mother’s hand and placed it on top of her own.

Gabe cleared his throat. “Father, thank you for the opportunity to lay hands on this beautiful little girl. At this time, we command in Jesus’ name, that the cancer is gone. Her blood returns to normal. Her um, platelets return to normal. Her organs that are failing are now healthy and strong. There will be no residual damage from this disease or from the chemotherapy that was administered.” He stopped briefly and then went on.

“Father not only is this child completely healed, but your Holy Spirit will touch all of the doctors involved and give them clarity of mind. They will be lead to Dr. Wallace’s protocols and they will go forth to strongly make a change in this hospital and in many hospitals across the country. Father, this one is a big deal and will change many lives, save many lives and they will be able to turn to this healing and see for themselves that you and Dr. Wallace are working together to heal Your children. Little Maria here and many others will be healed because of our work today. Thank you Father, thank you so much, in Jesus’ name, amen.”

They remained still for several seconds, not wanting to move and disturb the beautiful feeling of love and power that seemed to be surrounding them.

Jeffy smiled up at Gabe and he let out a soft sigh. “That was cool.”

She laughed. “Yeah, it was.” She turned to Mrs. Flores. “Ma’am, you heard what he said. Maria is healed. We may not see a change until morning, but she is most definitely healed.”

Mrs. Flores began to cry.

“Um, Dr. Kino, maybe we shouldn’t make promises,” Dr. Santiago said.

Jeffy smiled at him. “I know it’s hard to fathom. I get it. I’ve seen many miracles and sometimes even I question. But this is one I have no doubts about. None whatsoever.”

“But how can....”

“Momma?”

Mrs. Flores gasped as her daughter spoke for the first time in three days.

“Maria? I’m here, baby. Momma is right here.”

Jeffy and Gabe smiled. Gabe couldn’t stop his tears. Jeffy glanced at the doctor with a smile. “You see, Doctor Santiago? Sometimes it just takes a tiny bit of faith.”

She looked back at Gabe. “Where to, Mr. Tanner?”

Gabe sighed and closed his eyes. “I see a teen on this floor. I see the NICU department, and I see the...”

When he didn’t go on, Jeffy raised her eyebrows. “What else? What else do you see?”

He sighed and shrugged. “I— see— the morgue.”

✝✝✝

January 31st 12:30 PM Friday Afternoon

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Except for a few, the only current occupants of the Inn were members of the west coast family; the Kinos, Lees, Adams, Wallaces, Davises, and the men now thought of as, “The Twelve.” The two exceptions were Curtis Potts, who was Thomas Sawyer’s driver and friend, and Justice who was out in the cottages.

Though there were close to thirty men currently gathered together, including newcomers Toby and Brody, the atmosphere was subdued. The men currently sat around the giant Inn dining table, talking over and remarking about what they’d experienced the day before at the Sawyer house, or now, *Lily’s Place*.

This morning, they’d risen for breakfast, then they’d gone about to see to their own spiritual needs. Some went back to their rooms to the seek the Lord, some of them went for long walks to pray and kneel alone in nature. Some had re-watched the video. There were some distortions and the video did not pick up what they’d seen in the end, in the sky, the giant portal. Still, there was enough to have documented some very supernatural events.

Everyone had come together again for lunch and were now currently waiting for the Tanners to arrive, specifically, the Tanner girls to arrive. They wanted to see and bless the two girls whose lives had been spared. Nine of the twelve had never met or

seen the Tanner ladies and they were looking forward to meeting them. They'd heard that all of them, not just Lily and Iris, were like angels, both in physical appearance, and also spiritually.

Gabe and Keegan would be arriving with the ladies. The men heard from Cam about Gabe and Jeffy's expedition through *Children's Hospital* the night before. They worked almost five hours visiting families and healing sick or injured children through the power of Jesus Christ. They also prayed over and subsequently healed two nurses, a doctor and the mortuary technician who'd been struggling with two things, one physical, one psychological. The physical one was he'd contracted HIV through contact with a patient. The psychological one he didn't really know he had. But his psyche was suffering from handling so much death of young children and the heartache of their families. He was prayed over, blessed, and Jesus gave him immediate peace. The young man didn't know Jesus before that, but he knows Him now.

The venture had worn out Gabe and Jeffy to exhaustion both physically and emotionally, and they'd both slept late.

Jodi poked her head into the dining room with Hannah by her side. "Gentlemen, is there anything I can get for you? Something to drink?"

John looked around the table and then back up at his wife. "No, sweetheart. It looks like everyone is fine. And if we do need anything, I'll get it. But thanks, honey. You've taken such good care of everyone."

"That she has," Eric said softly. He looked around the table. "Jodi was one of my students waaaay back when she was a teenager. John was also my student and he took Jodi under his wing."

"Ach, sounds like a good love story," Billy Wallace chirped.

"It was," John said. "It is. Jodi is the best."

Jodi smiled. "I think that's my cue to leave. The Tanners just walked up. I'll go welcome them."

The men all turned to see the Tanner family come in the door. Lizzy walked in first, her sweet smile in place. Jodi welcomed them, hugging her friend mightily. Heather also received a hug as she came in, Nolan right behind her, carrying a seat with a baby in it. Rose and Violet were next, then Lily and Daisy, then Gabe, with Iris in his arms and then Keegan holding another baby seat with another baby in it.

The men had risen from their places in the dining room and shifted into the lobby/foyer area to greet the Tanners.

"My, they do look like a flock of angels," Sakchai said softly.

Eric nodded. "I've always thought so."

Ricky smiled. "This family, they're special. There's power emanating from them. They have a special place in my heart."

"Mine too," Justice said as he moved forward into the lobby and immediately hugged his girl.

"You doing okay?" he asked quietly.

Lily smiled up at him. "I am awesome. I'm so happy. Maybe a little tired."

Justice nodded. “That’s understandable. I too, am tired.”

She reached up and rubbed her good hand over his cheek.

He smiled, took her hand and squeezed it.

Once they were all inside and had taken off their coats, Keegan smiled at the group of men standing there.

“Hey guys,” he said quietly. “May I introduce you to my family.”

He smiled as he took Lizzy’s hand. “This lovely lady is my wife, Elizabeth, though most everyone calls her Lizzy.”

Lizzy smiled. “It’s nice to meet you all. I can’t thank you enough for coming here and doing what you did. I thanked God for you many times last night and asked Him to bless you.”

“Well, thank you, Lizzy,” Ces said. “We can use all the blessings the Lord is willing to give.”

Billy nodded. “Indeed, and just the seeing of your happiness and feeling your relief over the healing of your wee one, and your bonny lass there, it is a fine blessing, for sure.”

Lizzy smiled. “You must be the one from Scotland who is Cam’s great grandfather.”

“Ach, yes, how could you tell?” he quipped and everyone laughed.

Lizzy looked at the first one who’d spoken to her. “And, you, you’re the one from Australia?”

He smiled. “Very good.”

“I know the countries you all came from, so it’s just a process of elimination.”

The men became playful. “Guess me,” Lev said.

Lizzy frowned as she thought. “Well, you only said two words, but I’m gonna say maybe Russia?”

“Very good.”

She pointed at Miguel. “Peru?”

He nodded with a smile.

“Do me,” Andrew said.

Lizzy smiled. “Africa?” She then pointed to Sakchai. “Thailand?” She pointed to Alo. “Oklahoma? And— um, I think it was Norway?” she said, pointing at Henrik. She smiled. “How’d I do?”

“You left out, that one,” Billy said as he pointed at Ronny.

“Oh, well, that one I already knew because I’ve watched the church services and Gabe has spoken about him.”

“You did a great job, Lizzy,” Eric said. “And it’s nice to see you.”

“You too, Grandmaster Kino. Always.”

“Now that we’re finished playing the game,” Keegan went on. “These are my daughters in order of age. This is Heather, and that guy is her fiancé, Nolan Sawyer, whom we just recently discovered is actually related to Thomas and Justice. It’s a long story, so we’ll talk about it later. This is Rose, and this is her twin, Violet. They both just became engaged, but their guys aren’t here today. They actually had to

work."

Rose and Violet smiled prettily. "Hey everyone," they said in unison, making the men chuckle.

Keegan went on. "This is Lily and her twin, Daisy."

All the men zeroed in on Lily and she smiled. "I just want to thank you all so much for what you did."

They smiled kindly.

"And this little munchkin is Iris," Gabe said as he set her down on the floor.

Iris smiled at the men. "Fank you for making da bad fings go away."

They all smiled warmly at her and laughed softly at her cuteness.

Keegan then pointed at the babies in their carriers. "And that is Isaiah, and that little flower is Gentian."

"Keegan," Ces began, "How blessed you are. You have a wonderful family. Nine children! Amazing. And Grandmaster Kino is right, your daughters are like a flock of angels. So beautiful and so sweet."

"Except me," Rose said.

Billy laughed. "Ach, oh, I see this one very clearly. She's still an angel, she's just a warrior angel."

They all laughed.

Keegan smiled. "That is exactly what she is."

"Such a special family," Miguel said. "Muy especial."

"Thank you," Keegan said. "I am very blessed and I am a very happy man. And now that you all have vanquished the evil, we all are so very grateful."

Gabe nodded. "Beyond grateful. To God and to you all," he said softly.

"Don't forget Gabe, that you were a big part of what was done yesterday," Henrik said firmly.

Gabe lowered his eyes and shook his head. "I feel very unworthy to be counted in your group."

"Didn't we already have this discussion?" JoJo said.

Gabe smiled. "Guess I'm a slow learner."

They all looked up as Jeffy came down the inn stairs carrying Eli.

Cam went to her immediately and took the baby from her.

"Thank you, Cam," she whispered softly.

"Jeffy," Eric began, "did you get enough rest?"

"Yes sir. I did. And I have a message, and I've been told that you all, well, I mean the twelve, also have received messages. Each of you. Is it true, or did I not hear correctly?"

Eric smiled. "Very good, Jeffy. It's true. Or, at least, I did."

"I did," Ronny said quietly. "But I wasn't supposed to say anything until you mentioned it."

The other men nodded.

"Well, there are a lot of people here, Jeffy said. Can we all fit around the dining room table?"

Young Eric eyed the crowd. “Well, there are twenty-nine men, eight women, one teenager, three babies and a toddler.”

Toby spoke up. “And Caroline and Grace will be coming over soon.”

Gabe shook his head. “It wasn’t very nice of you, bro, to single me out as the one teenager.”

Young Eric laughed. “I was talking about Hannah, not you, you idiot.”

Gabe grinned. “Oh, okay. Well then, now I’m being singled out as the only idiot. My feelings are hurt.”

“Toughen up there, Gabriel,” JoJo said with a laugh.

“Well,” John interrupted their banter. “We can usually seat thirty-six at the table, but we can add in a few extra chairs so we can all sit and talk.”

“Yes,” Jodi agreed. “But really, Hannah is going to help me watch over the babies right here in the living room, so we don’t need chairs.”

“And I’ll help too,” Rose said.

“Jodi, Rose, I hate for you to be left out,” Lizzy said softly.

Jodi smiled. “We won’t be left out. We can hear what’s being said. And we’re gonna record the meeting anyway, for Bugs and Lisa and all the women out on the west coast, and Jake, cuz you know he’s gonna wanna know everything that went down while he was gone.”

Once everyone was settled around the dining room table, they all turned their attention to Grandmaster Kino, who immediately turned and smiled at John Appel.

“John, this is your home and we’re grateful for your hospitality. Please take charge of this meeting.”

John smiled. “Well, thank you for the nod, Grandmaster Kino. I’ll open with prayer and then I’ll turn the time right back over to you,” he said as everyone smiled at the respect being shown.

John prayed a heartfelt prayer and blessed the participants and then turned the time over to Eric as promised.

Eric immediately turned the time over to his daughter. “Let’s not waste any time,” he began. “Jeffy, you said you have a message from the Lord. Are you ready to share it?”

She nodded and rose. “Yes sir.” She looked around the table and then shook her head. “Oh my goodness, everyone, there is so much power in this room.” She drew a deep breath, briefly closed her eyes and went on. “Okay, so, Jesus spoke to me and told me to make sure you know that He is indeed so very pleased with all of you. You didn’t give up. You pushed through and you accomplished your goal. He says that you opening that portal was important. He wants you to commit to memory the feeling you had when you accomplished opening the portal.

“Remember your thoughts, the ones you had before accomplishing the goal, every minute, every second, embed it deep into your psyche so that you can pull that feeling up again and accomplish the goal again. That’s right, you will be called upon to open another portal, only next time, you will be on your own. So, remember that feeling, think of it everyday. Record your thoughts and feelings in a journal asap and

read it over often. It's like exercising a muscle to make it strong, therefore, exercise that muscle every day, even several times a day. Do not forget. Do not put this assignment aside. Something big is coming. Something big and you must be prepared. But how do you prepare? You keep doing what you're doing. You live as holy as possible. Honest, noble, strong, compassionate, charitable. Not because you must earn your way, for you are saved by the grace of Jesus' gift. You live holy not to save yourselves, but to save others. They see goodness and righteousness instead of dishonesty and hypocrisy and are drawn to that light. We also live holy for one more reason, and that is— to stay in tune with God so that you can hear His voice clearly."

Jeffy stopped and drew a deep breath. "You continue to serve others. If one of you doesn't have the resources to help someone, you now have each other, and you have the people in this room. You have only to ask. This room is filled with power. Not just the power of the twelve, but everyone in this room is powerful and has vast resources. Money, yes, but knowledge of the law, and knowledge of tactical strategies. There are doctors and counselors and advisors and teachers, power elites in every category. It's time to reach out of your own little world. Make big moves. Do not be afraid. God is with you and no weapon formed against you will prosper. That doesn't mean the weapon won't be formed. However, the weapon won't triumph."

She stopped again and drew a deep breath. "Okay, that's all I have right now. But one more time, well done everyone, not just the twelve. Everyone. There was no egos. There was only a desire to serve and help. You all totally rocked it."

Eric nodded. "Thank you, my sweet Jeffy."

She grinned. "You're welcome, Daddy."

The men chuckled.

"It's truly adorable the way she goes from prophetess to daddy's little girl in the wink of an eye," Henrik said.

Everyone in the room murmured their agreement with that statement.

Eric smiled. "I agree. It's always been a strange road to walk with my daughter. But she grows stronger and wiser with each day." He looked around the table into the eyes of the men and then nodded. "And now, I feel inclined to call on Ces. Do you have something to share with us?"

Ces smiled and nodded. "The subject, the message the Lord put in my mind and heart was our health. Though most of us here, are pretty awake and aware in that area, the Lord asked me to encourage everyone to be very diligent in taking care of our bodies. Though I am a doctor, I have learned much by traveling here. We have all traveled here from around the world, and staying with the Kinos, even for a short time, watching them, learning from them, witnessing their amazing physical skills, their youth and vigor, and seeing them put Dr. Kino Wallace's protocol into practice, and now learning even more from a few conversations with Thomas, we have been given a clear example of what we need to do. Now, of course, all of our bodies and attributes are different. But we must take care of what the Lord has given us, be it a

big, strong, powerful athletic body, or a smaller frame. We must work with what we have been given. Even small bodies can be strong. Picture martial artist Bruce Lee, or boxer Manny Pacquiao [pa·kee·au]. Physically, they made much out of what God gave them.

"So, we must try very hard to eat pure foods as much as possible, exercise, stretch, hydrate, even get enough rest. Jesus says these things will be important when we are reaching to open a portal on our own. We must be physically strong. The twelve are old, well, all but one, however, I've been told that will not affect our efforts if we are faithful in this sage advice. We will not falter when the time is at hand. In Isaiah 40:29-31 it says, *'He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.'* This is the promise the Lord has asked me to tell you if we but make an effort to take care of our bodies. Though, of course, as I always say, get your own confirmation from the Lord."

He stopped and smiled at them as he realized he didn't have to say that, for they all have a close relationship with the Lord. He sighed. "What a pleasure to realize that I am in the company of men who don't need me to tell them that. So, let us take care of our bodies the best we can." He nodded. "I believe that's it and I am supposed to call upon Sakchai to go next."

Eric smiled at that. He hadn't known who to call on next. Of course, he thought, this is how the Lord *would* run this meeting. He didn't tell everyone what order to go in all at once. We must take the next step, and that step reveals the next. *"Remember that, and remind them at the end of the meeting*," Eric heard in his head. He nodded.

They all turned toward Sakchai, who gave a slight bow of his head and a soft smile. "Many of you don't yet know my life story, but I believe the Lord gave me this message to let me know that I will eventually have my own. My own what, you must be asking. My own vindication. Vindication is the message He gave to me. You will all have vindication. God is the defender of the righteous. He reminded me that it seemed to many people, on the day of Christ's crucifixion, that it was not so. But God's timing is not our timing, and we will all have our own vindication.

"God does indeed defend the righteous. He defends those falsely accused. He takes the part of those who have listened to him and are teaching what He says to teach and then been accused by others of being false teachers, false prophets, hearing from demons, etcetera. When someone claims to hear from the Lord, people are very quick to remind us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. They are passively assuming that we, those in this room who have seen an angel, we must be hearing from Satan or one of his demons. Well, what we just went through makes it clear that we are not in league with Satan and his followers.

People sometimes go straight to that because it's easier to believe we are hearing from demons than to believe that we have been visited by angels and we are hearing from God. They don't want to be called to repentance and to righteousness.

Also, there is resistance because some of what the Lord tells us is not really covered in His Word. It doesn't disagree with His Word, it simply goes further than His Word. God himself told Daniel to 'shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end,' indicating that the full understanding is reserved for a future, specific time, maybe even a future specific people who are mature enough to hear and understand the words. In Revelation John is told to seal up what the seven thunders say. In Isaiah 29 it speaks of a book that is sealed, for the people are not ready to hear. So, all this means, that we must not judge or draw conclusions. And mostly, don't worry that we are misjudged because we will indeed have vindication.

"Now, from a different perspective, another reason people also go immediately to the thought that we might be deceived by Satan is because Jesus warned us to be very careful to not be deceived, therefore, people are just trying to be careful. The thing is, if they would build their own relationship with Jesus, they would know that He backs us one hundred percent. We all want vindication. It's a part of justice, but I won't go further into that because I've been told that it will be covered. Simply put, we will have vindication, but we must be patient.

"When Christ hung on the cross, it was a dark day for His followers. How could this happen? He was innocent. He was good and righteous and filled with love and light. How could God let this happen? Of course, we all know it was part of plan. A plan that shows the most noble gift being given to us. A love so great we cannot comprehend. A strength so strong us warriors look pitiful next to Him. Jesus' resurrection was beautiful vindication. And yet, it was only the beginning. He will set a table in the presence of our enemies. Vindication is coming. It will not only prove God's enemies wrong, but it will also prove those believers wrong who mocked and scoffed at other believers. Those are the ones that are the most hurtful to the Lord and to us. We expect pushback from the enemy, but we see it from our own Christ family. So, hold on, my friends. I too will hold on. Though I must say, just being part of this group, is all the vindication I need. And just in case you have any doubts, we all are absolutely on the right path."

Sakchai stopped and smiled with a nod. "I hope I have delivered the message well. Lev, my new friend, you have the floor."

Cam felt his heart would break. He'd researched Master Sakchai Chen or *Ajarn* as Master is called in Taiwan. His story was a hard one. When he'd been at the height of his career as a Muy Tai national coach, he'd been asked to train female fighters. That led to his downfall as he was falsely accused of inappropriate behavior. It totally destroyed his life, his marriage, his relationship with his children, and over the past thirty years he has lived in relative anonymity, totally dedicating his life to teaching Christianity and serving in poorer communities, mostly battling child trafficking. Cam will be happy for Master Chen when he receives his full vindication. Cam turned to pay attention to Lev's message, a man who also had an extremely sad life.

✝✝✝

January 31st 9:30 AM PST Friday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Shelley peered at the small square, through the phone at her eldest daughter. "Thank you, Bree, for organizing this last prayer call. Thanks, everyone, for being here. It's always important that we take time to show gratitude for blessings, and the way this whole thing turned out, I will be saying 'thank You Lord,' over and over for a very long time. When Lizzy gets out of her big meeting with the men, and has some time to herself, I intend to share some of my thoughts and feelings with her. Right now, I'm just so happy for her."

"Me too," Shelley heard from all the people on the call, which included, Bree Kino, Desi Morgan, Mickey Davis, Brook Tattersall, Bella Adams, who, with her little Emily, was visiting Naomi Bell, so Naomi was brought into the inner circle. Then there was Breez Adams, Carol Keith, Linda Clark, Pastor Patrick Barnes, Bristol Palma, and Jewell Brooks, Lori and Angel Lee and Kimmie and Jensen Deal. And then there were the ones right there in the room with Shelley, Melody Keith, Hazel Iman, Dani Quinn and Anna Wallace. They'd just ended a giant Zoom prayer call that included a piggy back from Gabe's website prayer warriors and hundreds of thousands more, who understood the need to express gratitude for the lives of Lily and Iris Tanner and for the triumph over evil. The main call had ended but remaining were almost all the people in the inner circle, who were on the west coast, though a few were missing. Taylor was at school. Zoe was at school. Phillip and Lyle Keith were at school. Kaylee was at school. Raylynn was at work. Alec Morgan, David Keith and Ryder Bell were also working.

Shelley listened to everyone expressing their feelings and sentiments for what the Tanners just went through. The love and compassion being shown was beautiful. The descriptions given to them by their loved ones who'd been in that house, descriptions of what went down, it was eye opening, flabbergasting and confirmation all in one. Their men plus Jeffy, had been through a battle. They were cut up and bruised, but they were victorious. They were tired. That was very clear. Which meant it was time for their women to get ready for their return, which would be happening tomorrow morning.

"Okay, everyone," Shelley began. "Thanks for being on this gratitude prayer call. I love you all with a fierce love. And now, I'm gonna suggest that you show your fierce love and support to our men when they return. I mean, fresh meals, fresh clothing, fresh sheets..." She had to stop as some of the women giggled and made somewhat salacious comments. Shelley had to giggle herself at a few, but got control. "Hey ladies, I just think I should remind you that young, unmarried Pastor Pat is on this call."

That got complete silence which made Shelley laugh again.

All eyes zeroed in on the tiny square that was Pastor Pat, Reverend Ronny's grandnephew. He gave a soft laugh. "Well, I am young AND unmarried, but I appreciate the way you want to take care of your men. Your *married* men that is. Well done."

"Thank you, Pastor Pat," Shelley said. "But anyway, ladies, a nice meal, lots of

hugs and kisses, and allowing them to simply talk or allow them to be quiet, whichever your guy seems to prefer. The point is, we can help and support them after they've been through such a hard battle. I know I don't have to tell you these things, but there are several young people on this call who might learn about what to do when their guy comes home from a hard day."

"What about when *we* have a hard day," Linda Clark, Ronny's daughter asked. "As long as we're addressing the subject," she added.

"That's an awesome question," Shelley said. "Who wants to answer it?"

"I will," Carol Keith suddenly said, surprising everyone, especially her daughter Melody.

"I can address it because I too have a job. And yeah, I sometimes have really hard days. And I was once on the bandwagon of like, why do us women have to cook and clean and take care of the kids? There are days when everything goes wrong for us women too, or days we just don't feel well and we still have to take care of things around the house. What's the difference? Well, I have to say, if I have a really bad day, but my child has a cold, do I tell my husband to take care of that child? No, because I have strong maternal instincts and I want to make sure my child is okay. So, I make him soup, I give him some medicine, or I have him go to bed, or whatever. It doesn't matter that I've had a rough day. My job as mom is what it is.

"Our men might also have a bad day, or just a hard day, but they don't expect me to take care of their business. If my husband David comes home after a bad day and I tell him the car won't start, does he say, 'sorry hon, I had a hard day, you go out and jump it off.' I know he wouldn't say that. So, I don't expect him to come home and clean the kitchen or make dinner just because I've had a bad day. However, if I *was* sick and he came home he WOULD make dinner. Why? Because I take good care of him and he appreciates me, and he wants to take care of me.

"So, what these men just did, what they just went through, I *know* I couldn't have done what they did. Lily and Iris would be gonners if it was left up to me, am I right? Do all you women think you could've taken care of that evil?"

"Not me," Bree said. "I'm glad our men were there to do it."

"Exactly," Carol went on. "We have roles. I know there are exceptions. I know there are women married to men who are cruel. I know there are single women who have a hard time. But that's not what we're talking about, so I won't let the 'women have a hard time too' thing hijack this conversation. My man is a good man. I love him and I want to make him want to come home to me, to a place he can feel welcome and at ease. Are there times when I feel unappreciated? Sure. Oh well. I suck it up. And if I wanted to tell my husband that, I would choose a good time to have a talk about that. He wants me to feel appreciated because I appreciate him." Carol stopped and sighed.

"I might have not made much sense. But I've learned what I'm talking about through my own experience, my own feelings of resentment and most recently, from watching Shelley and Bella and Breez and Bree and Mickey. They love and appreciate their men. They don't nag at them. Are there men who come home and

unreasonably demand their wives pamper them? Yes of course. Are there women who don't appreciate their husbands? Sure. But when both people are striving to do God's will, then they accept being called to repentance. And that's really what it is. If David came to me and said, 'Carol, when you nag at me the minute I walk into the house, it's a little overwhelming and makes me want to avoid coming home.' That may sound like a helpful hint from him, but to me, it's a call to repentance, and lately, I've had to do a lot of repenting. We both have."

There was a lull, so Mickey chimed in. "Carol, that's beautiful what you just said. It was vulnerable and honest and you are absolutely right. There are gender roles generally speaking, and we both have a tough time. In *my* parent's marriage, my stepfather ruled with an iron hand and my mother was extremely subservient. That's not the way it's supposed to be either, so when people buck up about gender roles, they think that's what we're saying; that the women should be subservient to the men. It's not. Us women are important and we are a helpmate for the men. Jeff and I know how important the other one is to our marriage and to our family. For me, the Kinos have set such a good example of how to balance the roles. The men serve and support and protect the women. The women serve and support and take care of their man. It's a beautiful thing to see."

"Right Mickey," Bree said. "And though there are exceptions as to which role a person should play, in general, that's how it should be because that's how God planned it from the beginning. Adam was first. Eve was made FOR him. Even, FROM him. It's beautiful, the give and take. It's that way in everything. Even in the sexual part of the union. There is beautiful give and take, offer and receive. It's so beautiful."

"That is beautiful, Bree," Hazel Iman said softly in her lovely Australian accent. May I add a little bit to this conversation?"

"Of course," Shelley said quickly, along with several others.

"Thank you. Most of us on this call have a marriage based in God or want to have that sometime in the future. From what I can gather, several of you have experienced what it's like to not have God in your marriage. It's a nightmare for both women and men, when God is not our number one priority. This is what's happening to the world. Satan and his demons, which we absolutely know are real based on what our men have just battled, they knew that to destroy the world and claim the souls of God's children, all they really have to do is destroy the family. What better way to do that than to mix us up on the roles of men and women.

"The demons whisper to women, it's not fair, you have to do all the hard work, men are trying to enslave us, men are horrible pigs, we can be just as strong as men, we don't need men, men use their strength against us, we are just as smart... which we are, but we're still different. We think differently and we are different emotionally. Our brains work differently. Men are usually not all into their feelings like we are. Instead they are more logical. They see a problem, they solve it. We are more emotional. We get hurt easily. We are sensitive and we hold grudges. Our sensitivity though, is what makes us good mothers and nurturers. We are important,

but not so important that we don't need men. If women would stop listening to the demons and accept who they really are, the feminine, who works hand in hand with the masculine, but does not become the masculine or assume his role, if women would do that, and men would not take advantage of their leadership role, then we would all be so very happy, and the way to do that is to keep God first in everything and we will find the perfect happy medium."

Hazel smiled and nodded. "I may have said too much, but I felt I needed to get that out."

"It wasn't too much at all," Shelley said immediately. She turned to Ronny's daughter. "So, Linda," she said with a smile. "I hope this answers your question. It's a lot to take in. But I feel led to say this; since you don't have a man right now and your father doesn't have your mom right now, you could assume that role for a bit and welcome your father home with a nice meal and a big hug."

Linda nodded. "Thank you, Shelley. You're right. I'm learning a whole lot from you people and I'm beginning to understand the things my father was always preaching about. Guess I'm a slow learner."

The others laughed. "Aren't we all?" Breez said.

✝✝✝

1 Corinthians 11:12

"For as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman.
And all things are from God."

Chapter Thirty-One

Still January 31st 1:00 PM EST Friday Afternoon
Back over to the Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Lev smiled at Sakchai and nodded his head. It was his turn to tell the message the Lord had given him. "My message has to do with life. What I mean is, living or not living. Who cares? That's how I felt at one point. My daughter had been raped and thereafter, she took her own life. My sons had been imprisoned and killed. My wife died of cancer. I'd been working for the Lord before all that, ever since an angel came to me when I was trapped by a mudflow that washed out the tracks of the Circum–Baikal railway, which was part of the Trans-Siberian railway.

"But after my imprisonment and losing my family, I lost my zeal for Jesus. I lost my will to live. I wanted to die. I didn't care about anything anymore. I was mad at God. I was tired. I still believed, I knew Jesus was real and that I would one day see my family again, but I was too battle weary and I lost my connection. Or so I thought.

"I left Russia only because my wife begged me to do so on her death bed. I left only to honor *her*. When the Russian government hunted me down, I'm not even sure why I went out into the Amazon to try to survive. I didn't really care if they killed me. Well, I didn't know then, but I know now, it was because God chose me and was not willing to let me go. I was listening to the ever-present whisperings without even realizing I was doing that.

"When I began to interact through the presentation of small gifts, with an un-contacted tribe, somewhere deep inside, it stirred me. I had this thought that others may not know those people, but Jesus did. He knew them. I wondered what He thought of them. I wondered if He interacted with them. I wondered if maybe they weren't exactly who we think they are. If maybe they were not some uneducated natives, but instead a highly intelligent, maybe even angelic group of people. All those thoughts were going through my head. And Jesus began to speak to me again. He told me that we don't know what we don't know. There is so very much that we don't know, but only think we do. So, therefore, we should not draw conclusions, or at least final conclusions.

"When I rescued a child of that un-contacted tribe and returned him to his people, I felt their gratitude and their love. They loved that child. They loved me. That's the only thing I really know about them. Shortly after that I was shot by the rogue Russian guerillas and left for dead. Then, through an amazing show of humanity, I was transported through diverse lines until I reached Miguel. And there, in my brother's care, surrounded by his love and his prayers, I found my connection again. I remembered, and listen, because this is ultra important, I remembered that my calling was *not* to live happily ever after with my family here on earth, but to live with them happily in the Kingdom of God. That is the goal. That is the real, everlasting prize.

"And now, we just witnessed an incredible thing. We watched a family acquiesce to the will of God. They accepted, without bitterness, that they may lose two important, essential members of their family. With tears, yes. With sorrow, yes. But bravely, and with pure faith, they vowed to accept God's will and to continue on and teach others that their joy will return and be beyond anything they could imagine. They did what I could not. And now, I am so grateful to see their joy and also, their relief. And last night, Jesus spoke to me and reminded me that I too will have that relief and I remembered that I will have that joy when I see my wife and children again. Jesus then reminded me, that simply making it to life beyond this earth life, that is NOT the goal. Once we are there, we are barely beginning to know the amazing works and joy that we will experience. There is so much more to do, accomplish, or achieve. To do that, all we need to do is keep the faith for this short period of time.

"So, yes, live. Live this earthly life to it's fullest. Be faithful. Don't give up. However, accept the will of God in all things as we experience this earth life, because we have a whole lot of living to do once we leave this earth." Lev wiped at the tears that had fallen on his cheeks and nodded with a smile. "And now, my brother, it's your turn, Miguel."

Miguel nodded. "I love you brother," he said softly. "Interesting enough, the message the Lord put on my heart was love. Let's not forget the love. In the book of Revelation, when Jesus talks about the church of Ephesus, he commends them for their hard work, for their discernment and for their patient endurance, but then He calls them out for forgetting the love they had at first, their love for Him and their love for each other. His warning isn't a suggestion. He doesn't just tell them to do better, or to try harder. He tells them to get it right or He will remove their lampstand. That means that this love is ultra important, maybe more important than all the other good things they were doing. The message I was given is to keep our relationship with Jesus close, so that we can be in love at all times. The love is the most important thing. It is the love of Jesus that everything is based on. He said, 'If you love me, keep my commandments.' And He said, 'As I have loved you, love one another.'

"Jesus told me that He didn't give me this message because any of us has lost our love. He just wants us to remember it is the basis of everything, and don't let it slip away. Keep it fresh in our hearts and minds." Miguel stopped and smiled "And specifically, I have a message for you, my brother Lev. You are loved and you will be called upon to save many people in the Amazon wilderness with your survivor skills. You are important. And we are all glad that you chose to live."

Lev choked back the emotion that flooded him.

Miguel nodded. "And now, I believe we are to hear from you, Brother Quinn."

Alo Quinn nodded with a smile, looked around the table, and began speaking in his soft, slow manner. "The message I was given is one I've learned well over the course of my life. It has to do with victimhood. Victimhood in our country and I think around the world, has become an epidemic. It is a mind virus that leads to entitlement. Everyone is crying over what happened to them in their lives, and even what happened to their ancestors in their lives. I call it the 'woe is me' syndrome. It has become the cause of

much turmoil and violence and it is destroying mankind.

"My own people, the American Indians or what are now called Native Americans, the indigenous people, they claim they have a right to be angry. I suppose they have as much right as any people who have been conquered. That's what happened. We were conquered. We were not strong enough to hold the land we think belonged to us, though it really belongs to God. We were not strong enough to hold the land we claimed as our own. We were conquered. Many peoples in this world have been conquered. But how silly for us to live in anger and resentment for the rest of our lives or worse, to teach that anger and resentment to our children, to teach them bitterness, and continue on in that victimhood mentality? God gave us life. What will we do with it, just as Ces talked about earlier about our bodies, what will we do with what God gave us?

"We all know that the Bible does not condone slavery as many non-Christians like to say. However, it does say that if your lot in life was, or is, to be a slave, then you be the best darn slave you can be. So, if your lot in life is to be a conquered people, then take the lot you've been given and run with it by making something of yourself instead of wallowing in hatred and self-pity. What will we do with the lot God gave us? If He can trust us with little then maybe we will show that He can trust us with a lot.

"Much of this woe-is-me syndrome is blamed on racism. I cannot speak for others, but I know racism exists, racism against *every* race. I know of many American Indians who hate a person simply because they are white. That IS racism. And of course, we know the reverse too, is real. It's certainly been shoved down our throats. I didn't realize how much until I got a computer and got caught up in what's happening with the world." He stopped and smiled. "It's a good thing. This education I'm receiving is not bad. We cannot live in ignorance. I needed to know what was happening.

"There is a huge cry of white privilege and racism. But *every single race* has been the victim of slavery. The difference is, some have overcome and some have stayed in that victim mentality. We must not allow ourselves to cry 'woe is me,' no matter what we have faced, whether it is racism, or trouble with the opposite sex, or trauma from abuse by parents or spouses, or victims of crime. Be strong. You've wallowed enough. Let it go. Give it to Jesus. Stop talking about it. Stop reliving it. Stop identifying with it. The only 'safe space' you will ever find is with Jesus. So, let go and think, what can we do with this life we've been given?"

He stopped and took a deep breath. "Well now, that's the most I've said in one sitting in a very long time."

The others at the table laughed softly.

Alo smiled. "Those are the Lord's words. Not mine. Victimhood is a mental virus and is destroying humankind. That's pretty much it. I realize I've just barely scratched the surface, but that's it in a nutshell. So you've had a hard life. Get over it. Deal with it. Stop being little babies crying over what cannot be changed. Stop looking for a safe space where no one triggers you. The only thing to do is move forward. This is a thing we need to teach the world. The Lord told me that Grandmaster Kino is very big on getting rid of victimhood, that he is an expert. Talk to him." He turned and smiled at the man and nodded and then went on. "And now, I believe I am to call on Mr. Andrew

Musani."

Andrew smiled and nodded his head in the humble way he had about him. "I thank you, Alo Quinn. What a wonderful word you just gave. I agree with you, victimhood is a mind virus. Well said. And I like what you said, that you were not strong enough to hold your land. You take responsibility for your weakness. If I may add, as one born of African heritage, we cannot be mad at anyone but ourselves. We sold our own into slavery. While we were barely learning to live together in peace as tribes, other peoples were building temples and conducting orchestras consisting of amazing instruments or painting the Sistine Chapel. My people have come a long way since then. We have learned much. The point is, whatever lot in life God has given us, what will we decide to do with it? Which brings me to what the Lord gave me, which is— the importance of honesty. Honesty in ALL things. All. What I just said about my own people, I think the people of today call it 'keepin' it real,' or 'being straight up.'"

Gabe cleared his throat. "No cap."

Except for the young ones, the people in the room all raised their eyebrows in question.

Young Eric spoke. "It means like, um, no brag, just fact."

The others smiled.

"Yes, no cap," Andrew said with a smile. "What I just said about my own people, I'm just being honest. I'm just keeping it real. I, and my family, refused to be victims. My family was killed by people of my own race. My church was wiped out by people of my own race. The last ten years of my life I've been imprisoned by people of my own race. It has been hard. But I was being honed in the fire. It made me so that I will not be afraid to be honest and speak the truth in all things. The Lord wants us to not be afraid to be honest, painfully honest, truthfully honest. That doesn't mean we can't be tactful and kind, especially when we are ministering to the afflicted. But we must always be honest and not hide the truth or tickle ears.

"The Lord told me that we must not be afraid to tell people what He teaches. Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery or other sexual misconducts, which includes deviant lifestyles. Do not speak falsely against others. Do not covet what others have, be it their belongings or their spouses. Honor your father and mother, even if they have not been the epitome of grace and honor. Rest and be holy on the seventh day. Do not curse using the Lord's name, and worship only God and no idols which includes money, fame, celebrities, etcetera. These are true commandments.

"God knew what He was doing when he gave these laws to us. We must teach people the truth. We must be totally honest with ourselves and with others. It might even be harder to be honest with ourselves, but it must happen. Two of the ten commandments have to do with honesty; do not lie, and do not bear false witness. Numerous times in the Bible, God speaks against lying. He hates liars. 'Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord.' That was Proverbs 12:22. Honesty develops trust. So don't waver. Honesty brings honor, it brings admiration and it brings love, true honest love. Speak honesty. Live honesty. Be loving and compassionate, but we do not compromise with evil.

"Allow me to illustrate using a video I recently watched. A preacher at the pulpit was calling out known members of his congregation for adultery and immorality. He was speaking truth. That part was good. But he was not being loving and compassionate. He cast a member of the choir out publicly. He called out a pregnant woman in the congregation publicly. This is not how it should be done, shaming them in public. We don't lie. We don't tickle ears, but we do things in a loving and compassionate way and not for our own glory.

"So, yes, call these sins out. Remind the people of God's laws. But that is all you have to do. It is not up to us to punish them by calling them out publicly or in any form of punishment. That's assuming God's role and His authority. We have authority to speak in His name. We have authority to heal in His name. We have authority to cast out demons in His name. We have no right to judge or punish. That– is His domain. I have heard pastors say love the sinner but not the sin. This is true. The adulterous woman, who had already been called out publicly, Jesus didn't heap shame on her publicly. He simply told her to go and sin no more. So, why would this preacher on the video do what he did?

"I think you know. If we are being *HONEST*, we must say that he was making himself look good. Here he was, this great preacher who dared to speak truth to his congregation. How righteous and strong he is. He knew the video would get likes, because honestly, the people today are craving the truth to be told. Tell the truth. Be honest in all dealings, but still, do everything in love and compassion."

Andrew stopped and nodded with a smile. "I believe that is all the Lord would have me say at this time. I am now to call upon a man I am honored to have met just yesterday, Mr. Thomas Sawyer."

Thomas wiped the tears from his eyes and smiled at the faces looking at him. He shook his head. "I am so humbled to be included in this amazing group of people. I am so grateful for all of you and your wisdom and faithfulness and strength and kindness. The subject the Lord gave me last night was— justice."

Everyone smiled and turned to look at Thomas' grandson. Justice sighed and looked down, feeling very uncomfortable.

Ricky smiled. "Ya know what they say... Justice is a dish best served cold, because if it were served warm, it would be just water."

There was silence for a moment or two, and finally everyone chuckled.

Justice grinned. "Thank you, Mr. Kino.

Ricky nodded. "It felt like we needed some comic relief."

"Well done, Rick," Keegan said.

Thomas smiled. "Well done indeed." He sighed. "I guess the theme of justice is fitting, since that is what all you did for our family yesterday. You came here, you battled the evil and you gave us a form of justice. However, the message from the Lord is this: There is no justice. Not in this world. He is bringing justice with Him. In Isaiah 18:30 it says, 'Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you, therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice.' And one Psalm says, 'The Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice.' We will not have justice

until He brings it. Not real justice. Why? Because, as Andrew just so clearly pointed out, we cannot judge. Only He can judge, or only those He has chosen to judge.

"And here is a theme we've already heard today, but He also told me, we don't know what we don't know. Only God knows our hearts. Only God knows our trials. Only God knows exactly what we've faced and only God can bring justice. Real justice. True justice. It's a human trait, to want justice. We crave it. We want things to be fair, and yet, who can judge if things are fair? This cry we've heard lately to make everyone equal, there is no equal because we are not equal. Some would say, well then, that's not fair. But it *is* fair. Each was given what they were given to work with. Work with what you have been given, and watch the Lord make a way. But is it fair and just that some would have it easier than others? There is no 'fair.' Because we don't know what we don't know.

"That sentence isn't like the one that says, 'it is what it is.' There is a shrug and an acceptance in, 'it is what it is.' But, we don't know what we don't know means, we have no idea of all the knowledge we are missing, so we'd better be careful not to make a judgement. So then, we are only tested or tempted to what we can resist, right? Well there are some who can resist much, and some only a tiny bit. We don't know which is which, but the Lord knows. He knows us. He knows our hearts and minds and our thoughts. And only He knows and has seen what the dark forces have been doing to us behind the scenes. He knows, He sees, He judges. Isn't it amazing?" Thomas stopped and smiled. "Like others have said, I could go on and on, but this is a nutshell." He turned to smile at Ronny. "Ronald Clark, sir, I am to call on you."

Ronny smiled and nodded his head. "Very well. I admit, I've been sitting here wondering why the Lord gave each person their particular subject to expound on. I've been doing that because mine is one I believe I mishandled when I was younger, and that one is the subject of God's grace, His gift to us and how it is not a license to sin. I say I mishandled this, because back when my son died in Vietnam, my preaching at my little church became harsh. It became like a fire and brimstone kind of preaching, using very vivid warnings if we don't repent of our sins and live righteously. I was very harsh and I made my own daughter leave home. I, like Miguel talked about, I forgot the love. Or so I thought.

"But when the Lord spoke to me last night, He let me know that I should forgive myself. He told me His grace is a free gift, but I wasn't wrong in that He also wants us to keep His commandments, for He cannot have unruly, undisciplined people in His Kingdom.

He told me that the problem is, people don't want to know the truth. He told me we, the people here in this room, know well all of the subjects that He has given us and that they all intertwine. He says we know them well, but He would like us to revisit these basic things, because we will be faced with them.

"He told me that my daughter left because she didn't want to be told that what she wanted to do was wrong in the Lord's eyes. She wanted to experience sin. She did, and because she chose that road, she has endured a very difficult and sad life. I love her and I hurt for her and I wish I'd had more love and compassion, like Andrew spoke about.

But that is off my subject. My subject is God's grace. His gift to us is pure grace. He asked the Father to forgive those who were beating him, killing him, mocking him. His forgiveness is given through grace and all we have to do is accept the gift.

"But how do we accept a gift from someone we don't believe in? And that's the crux. We can't. In order to receive His gift we must believe in Him. We must believe in His *ability* to forgive us. We must believe that in His forgiveness we achieve salvation, eternal life in His kingdom, but it doesn't end there. He said, if people think that is a license to sin, then they don't understand His grace.

He told me, if people say they believe in Him and accept His gift of grace, but then go on to willfully sin and do whatever they want, then, they are actually denying the Holy Spirit. When they accept His gift, they are saying that they believe in Him, in His authority, in His ability to forgive and grant them eternal life, AND they receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. That is an important 'AND.'

"The Holy Ghost, will bear witness to us. The Holy Spirit *should* change us, and He *will* if, and only if, we allow it. But if we do not change, repent and at least try to live as good and holy as possible, then we, in essence, deny the Holy Spirit, which, according to our Savior, is the one unpardonable sin. Not murder. Not child abuse. Not rape. Not betrayal. Not immorality. Not even hunting down Christians and killing them, as in Paul's case... but denying the Holy Ghost.

"Again, and it seems I have to say this many times when I'm speaking to people about this... again... we are not saved by our righteousness. We are not saved by our works, however, when we accept our Lord's gift, we are saying that we believe who He is, the Son of God who died for us on the cross and we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit and that gives us the divine power to overcome sin. People need to stop using the gift of grace to dabble in sin. If Jesus didn't want you to overcome sin, He wouldn't have said, 'If ye love me, keep my commandments.' Why did he tell the adulterous woman, 'go and sin no more'? In Romans 6:1-2 it says, 'What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?'

"Do we only try to live part of God's word?" Ronny asked. "And one more scripture in Matthew 11:20. It says, "Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not." In this scripture, Jesus is lamenting that He has called people to repentance in places where he had performed many great miracles and still they didn't repent. Why would He call people to repentance if it didn't matter? Why would He care. if it didn't matter. Of course, that's because it does matter.

"We're all saved, right? We accepted the gift. Some try harder to live holy lives. Others don't try at all. Well, there is a hierarchy in the kingdom of God, so, I know personally, that I want to try my very best to overcome all sin. I try, but thank God for His grace."

All the people sitting in the room smiled and nodded.

"I have spoken long enough. I am honored to call on my new friend from Norway, Brother Johansen.

✝✝✝

Still January 31st, 10:00 AM, Friday Morning
Construction site in South Whitten, California

Ryder Bell stopped, lifted his t-shirt to wipe the sweat from his face, then placed his hands back on the magnetic broom and continued on cleaning the site of nails and screws and anything metal. They'd just finished putting the roof on a new home and it was the last chore that needed doing. He wanted to get finished asap because he was hoping to take a break and make a phone call. He heard his name called and glanced to his left. The big boss, the contracter, Kyle Pitts, stood in the front yard waving at him.

"Ryder," the man called again.

Ryder stopped, laid the sweeper down and headed off to the front yard from the side where he'd been working. "Yes sir?" Ryder said as he approached.

"Ryder, I'd like you to join us on the final walkthrough to inspect the project."

Ryder's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Oh! Yes sir. Right now?"

"In about thirty minutes or so. We're waiting on the inspector." Kyle Pitts smiled at the young man. "You seem a little bit surprised."

"Oh, well, I mean, I guess I am, a little bit."

"Well, you shouldn't be. When I spoke to your uh, to Mr. Adams, I told him I would teach you all you need to know as we go along and in a few years you'll be a pro. I always keep my word."

"Well, thank you, sir. I'm willing to learn. So, what do I need to do?"

"Just be ready when the inspector arrives. So, here's your first inspection lesson; the inspector can keep you waiting as long as he wants, but you don't keep him waiting."

Ryder grinned. "Got it."

"How much more do you have to do?"

"I'm almost done with the sweeping. I just have to finish that last side."

"Alright. Then once you finish, take a break, get some water, and wash your hands, cuz, you'll have to shake hands with the inspector."

"Yes sir. Do I, um, do you think I have time to make a quick phone call?"

"If you can make it between now and 10:30. If not, wait until after he leaves."

Ryder nodded. "Okay, well then, let me get to it." He turned at a run to go finish the sweeping, then turned back. "Oh, and thank you, sir."

Kyle Pitts nodded. "You're welcome." He watched him go. Mark Adams was right about this young man. He's a good guy. A hard worker. A go getter. And he's gonna make something of himself.

Ryder quickly finished up the far side of the house, emptied the sweeper and put it away. He grabbed a bottle of water and drank it down, used the bathroom, washed his hands and pulled out his phone with plenty of time to spare. He went out to the street and stood by his car. He didn't want to get into the car in case he missed the inspector driving up, so he stood next to it. As he pulled up the number in his contacts he found his heart beating a mile a minute. His thumb hovered over the contact name for a few seconds as he gathered his thoughts. It simply said, '*Mom.*' He drew a deep breath and

hit the call button. The phone rang five times before she answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mom, it's me, Ryder."

"Hi Ryder," she said softly. "I can't get over your low voice. You're all grown up. I realize it's been nine years, but still, it seems so odd."

Ryder sighed because he didn't know what to say to that. "I'm, uh, I'm sorry, I grew up."

She gave a soft laugh. "Well, I'm glad you did. My prayers have been answered. I'm so sorry, Ryder. So sorry for everything. Do you ever see your father, or talk to him?"

"Mom, dad was arrested a few weeks ago."

Jeannette gasped. "Oh! What did he do?"

"He beat up Naomi."

"Who's Naomi?"

"Oh, yeah, you really haven't heard anything, have you?"

"No. Please understand, Ryder, I was afraid he'd change his mind and come after me and hurt me or worse, hurt Stephanie, so I kept a low profile and went on with my life as if he didn't exist."

Ryder swallowed. He'd wanted her to do just that, but he thought maybe she'd kept tabs on him at least, like, from a distance. He cleared his throat. "So, dad remarried a lady named Naomi. She was cool. A lot like you actually."

"So she wasn't an evil stepmother?"

"Just the opposite. She was good to me. She and Dad had two kids. Both girls. So, I actually have three sisters."

"Oh. Well that's nice I guess."

"Naomi and the girls are awesome. But Mom, Dad was arrested because he was doing to her just what he was doing to you."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that. Really. I'm sorry for her. But Ryder, when he gets out, he'll go right back to it."

"Well, he's not getting out. His bail was denied because he stomped on Naomi's stomach and killed the child she was carrying."

"Oh no," Jeanette whispered. "Oh, Ryder, I'm so sorry."

"Me too. But not sorry he's in jail."

"So, Ryder, last time we talked, we pretty much just cried and talked about the old times. We didn't talk about what happened after I left. If he hurt his new wife, I mean, well, did he hurt you?"

Ryder drew a deep breath. "I don't wanna talk about that right now. Bottom line is, I'm fine. I'm good. I'm actually great and now that I found you, I'm so happy. And that's why I'm calling Mom. You said we might could get together and see each other this weekend and I've waited for you to call, but here it is already Friday and the weekend starts tomorrow. So, I guess, I'm just wondering why you didn't call and if you still want to see me, because I really want to see you and Steph. You're all I can think about and I was worried when you didn't call me."

The several moments of silence made Ryder's heart drop in his chest. "Mom?" he finally said.

"Ryder," she said softly. "I do want to see you. I'm desperate to see you. But, the thing is, I wasn't sure how to handle it. I want to arrange a time when we can meet privately first, just you and me. And it needs to be somewhere else. I mean, not here at my home."

Ryder's heart and mind raced as he went over what she was saying, trying to digest it. The important part was she DID want to see him. That was a relief. "Oookaay," he finally said. "Can you tell me why? Are you in trouble? I mean, like, are you with someone who's like Dad?"

"What? No! No, I'm not. But I AM with someone. Ryder, I remarried too. I'm married to a wonderful man. He's kind and loving and good. He works hard and he makes a good living and he takes good care of me and the kids."

"Kids? So, like, you have more children?"

"Yes. Besides Steph, I have a seven-year-old, a five-year-old and a three- year-old. The first two are boys and the last is a girl."

Ryder was silent a moment. He had more siblings. "What are their names?"

"Wyatt is seven, Dylan is five, and Kennedy is three."

"Wow. That means I actually have six siblings, two brothers and four sisters. Wow. That's really something."

Jeanette took a deep breath. "Well, only one is your real sibling. The others are only half siblings."

"That doesn't matter to me. But anyway, how is Stephanie? She's eleven, right? Is she in middle school yet?"

"Yes. She's in the sixth grade."

"Wow. Awesome. So, Mom, I don't have a lot of time to talk right now. I'm at work. But, when can I see you?"

"Ryder, I love you. I've always loved you. I've hurt over you for so long and I'm so happy that you're doing well. I want to see you, but I have to be honest with you. Ryder..." She stopped to figure out how to say it.

"Ryder, my husband, he doesn't know about you. He knows I was married before and obviously he knows about Steph, but he doesn't know that I had a son. He doesn't know and I don't want him to know."

Ryder felt the panic reach out and grab his heart. He had no words.

"Ryder," his mother went on. "Please try to understand. I left you. I was a piece of crap mom who left her own son, knowing he would be facing a brutal man who was capable of anything. I was so ashamed. I cried for weeks, but then I finally pulled myself together for Steph's sake. I just wanted to start over and when I met the man who is now my husband, I was too ashamed to tell him and I don't want him to know. I think he would hate me, because I hate me."

Ryder drew a breath. "Mom, he wouldn't hate you. Remember, I begged you to leave me. I *wanted* you to leave. You did what I asked you to do. Please don't hate yourself. You were not a piece of crap mom. You were a wonderful mom. If you

weren't I wouldn't be so desperate to see you. Mom, please..." He stopped because his voice broke. He ran a hand over his face to get control.

"I don't deserve you, Ryder. You were a wonderful son. And now you're a wonderful young man."

Ryder began to panic. "Okay, okay, so look, okay, listen, I won't ask to be introduced to your family, okay? I just want to see you. Tell me you'll meet me, Mom. I *need* to see you." He stopped again as his voice clogged with emotion and tears welled in his eyes. He sniffed. "Please, Mom. I cried over you for years. Please let me see you. Let me hug you."

Oh baby boy," Jeanette whispered. "I'm so sorry," she said through her tears.

"Please Mom, please don't leave me again."

Jeanette sniffed. "Okay, Ryder, I won't. I won't, but just let me think a minute. Let me think of how we can do this." She was quiet a moment. "Okay, so, my husband is a contractor. He builds houses, but he's off on the weekends, so I can't see you this weekend. But he'll be at work on Monday and I'll meet you for lunch. *I'll* come to *you*. You said you're in Huntington Beach?"

"Yes, I live in Huntington Beach, but I'll be working on Monday, so I'll be over in South Whitten."

"Oh! My husband just finished up a job there, so I know a good place to eat. How about *The Taco Shop*. Kyle and I ate there just last week."

"Kyle?"

"Yes. That's my husband's name."

"Oh, well, that's interesting. You said he's a contractor? What kind of contractor did you say he was?"

"He builds houses."

Ryder felt his blood pressure rise, but instinctively knew to not speak what he was thinking. "Oh, that's nice. Um, so he's working in South Whitten?"

"Well he was, but he has a meeting with a new client on Monday down in Santa Ana."

Ryder nodded. "Mom, so, I mean, if you don't mind me asking, what's your new last name?"

"Pitts. I am Jeanette Pitts."

"And your husband is Kyle Pitts?"

"Yes, Ryder. Why?"

"I, um, I just wanted to know who my mom is, that's all. I promise, I'm not gonna cause any trouble or anything like that."

"I didn't think you would. But now that you say that, promise me Ryder, you'll keep my secret."

"I give you my word. I wouldn't do anything to cause you anymore heartbreak than you already went through. So, I'll meet you for lunch at the taco place Monday at 1:00, okay?"

"Yes. That will be good. Thank you, Ryder. I can't wait to hug you."

"Me too," he said. "Listen, Mom, so, I have to go. My boss will be looking for me

soon. I can't wait to see you, so, Mom, please, don't stand me up."

"I won't, baby. I miss you so much. And thanks for understanding the situation I'm in."

He sighed. "I do understand. I love you, Mom," Ryder said softly.

"I love you too."

Ryder hung up and pocketed his phone. He should be happy and excited. He would see his mother for the first time in nine years. In just three days, on Monday afternoon, he would sit across from her and look into her eyes, eyes that were so full of fear and sorrow last time he saw them. He should be excited, so why does he feel so drained, so sad. He really does understand why she wants to keep his existence a secret. Telling a guy she wants to impress that she left her son behind, he'd probably lose interest pretty fast. Most guys would. And that brought his thoughts to the next matter that had him floored.

Kyle Pitts, the man Ryder worked for, a man for whom he had much respect, was married to his mother. He had kids with his mother. His boss' kids were Ryder's half-siblings. It was just too much information. He felt like his mind and his heart might explode. Looking at it logically, Ryder was happy his mom found a good man who can take good care of her and Stephanie, and he wouldn't want to ruin that for her. But something was niggling at his brain. Maybe it was the thought that she'd found that man and married that man really under false pretenses. Ryder felt very uneasy about this whole thing. He wished Mr. Adams was home, or even just his new foster brothers, JoJo and Logan. He needed to share this information with someone before his brain exploded, or his heart burst.

Ryder was pulled from his thoughts when a silver Suburu Outback pulled up. Time to go back to work. He couldn't let his mind be bogged down with personal stuff right now. He couldn't blow this opportunity. Drawing a deep breath, he pasted a pleasant look on his face and went to join his boss, his mother's husband, as he shook hands with the inspector.

✝✝✝

Still January 31st, 1:30 PM, Friday Afternoon

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Henrik Johansen smiled and nodded at Ronald Clark when he called Henrik's name. He then looked around the gigantic table at all the attentive faces and smiled. "Thank you, Reverend Clark. It does indeed matter, if we choose to repent or not. If we choose to live according to the admonition of Paul, which is found in Philippians 4:8, where he tells us to seek or think about 'whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise.'" He stopped and nodded. "That brings me to the subject that the Lord Jesus gave me last night. The subject is not the admonition of Paul, though we twelve have been told by angels to live that. My subject is the *choice* to live like that. My subject is choice, or rather freedom of choice. Freewill. It is a very important subject.

"Every minute of every day we are presented with options. Life is really just a

series of choices. Freedom of choice is what God's plan depends on. We must choose to love or choose to hate. We must be *allowed* to choose to love or choose to hate, for if we are forced to love, well, think about it. That doesn't work. Let's say your beautiful wife, Keegan, was forced to love you. She was told she must love you, regardless of how she feels about you. We can all see that THAT is not real love at all, now is it? There are more choices than you think concerning that subject. We can love and choose to ignore that love or act on it. We can hate and choose to ignore that hatred or act on it. We can choose God's will, or our own. We can choose to fight or choose to be passive. We can choose to repent and or choose to continue in sin. We can choose to lie, steal, bear false witness, be immoral, commit adultery, have a deviant lifestyle, such as drugs, alcohol, or homosexuality. We can choose to dishonor our parents or worship false gods or idols. We can choose to live in the presence of God or in darkness. Those are choices people make every day. Some of them are educated choices, however, most of them are made by default, meaning, just going with what they know, going with the installed programs.

"I know that we here, in this room have made good, educated choices. If not earlier in our lives, then now for sure. Our job, or one of many, is to show all the other people of the world their choices. Show them that they do have a choice and the choice is important. They can choose to willfully sin, or they can choose to be righteous. Teach them that there are consequences for their actions, but not because God sends them to hell for a punishment. They can choose to live with God, accept the gift and live in the presence of God, or they can choose to deny the gift and live separately from God. When you sin, our Father is not sending you away, *you* are choosing to be separate from Him.

"But let's look at a little more gray areas and not so black and white. We can choose to accept the gift, choose God, but also choose to willfully sin. Will we still be in God's kingdom? Yes, because Jesus' gift is sufficient for all who believe in him. Yet, as the Reverend mentioned, there is a hierarchy. What does that mean?

A hierarchy means there are levels to God's Kingdom. Those worthy ones who chose to listen to the Holy Spirit and allowed Him to change them, allowed Him to help them overcome their sin, will they be closer in proximity to the Father? Those who continued in their sin, in their debauchery and darkness, will they be further away? God knows our hearts. He knows what we think, what we really feel inside. Only He knows, so the rest of us cannot judge. But like He told me last night and I have heard it a few times today; we don't know what we don't know, so we best not judge and instead simply turn our hearts and minds to God. If we don't know what we don't know, perhaps one day we will wish that we had tried harder to overcome sin because Jesus did say, 'If ye love me, keep my commandments.'

"In closing, without freewill we would only be puppets, just a play toy for our Creator. God's universe is based on two things. Love and freewill. Love is essential. Freedom to choose is ultra-important. Choose wisely." He smiled. "And now, I choose to call upon the name that the Lord has put in my head, one of the twelve who is closest in proximity to me, Mister Billy Wallace."

Billy grinned. “Ach, finally. I thought I might get left out.”

The people all laughed.

Billy shrugged. “Well, the Lord has quite the sense of humor and it wouldn’t surprise me if He left me out just to watch me squirm.”

“Good idea,” Jeffy said softly.

Everyone turned to look at her. She blushed and shrugged. “Those words just came into my head.”

Everyone burst out laughing and many pointed upward and nodded.

Gabe became emotional and quickly wiped at the moisture in his eyes.

“You okay, brother,” young Eric asked.

Gabe nodded. “Yeah, it just gets to me, ya know? I mean, Jesus is just so amazing. And when He takes time to joke around with us, I mean, I just love it.”

Young Eric and JoJo patted Gabe’s back just as a sudden wind blew Gabe’s hair off his forehead.

This time there were some gasps and several who became emotional.

Billy nodded. “Those were two good ones, Jesus.” He then got serious and drew a deep breath. “It’s good to know and to be shown that He is listening to us. No matter how many times we see miracles, we always still get a little excited when we witness His realness.”

Everyone nodded again.

“So then, the subject matter the Lord put into me head was the roles of male and female relationships. This has been my specialty, so to speak, my calling since the time the angel came to me. Ya see, my father was what some nowadays might call a beta male or even a simp. I was raised in a house full of women. My mother and four sisters were what some call strong women.” He shook his head. “But nah, that’s what these bonnie lasses here are. Miss Lizzy and her daughters, Dr. Wallace, Miss Jodi Appel, sweet young Hannah, those are strong women.

“But that’s not what my mother and sisters were at all. They were over-bearing, pushy, nagging, spiteful women who made both my father’s life and therefore my life almost unbearable. They were all about themselves. That’s how they were until I was ten. Once the angel taught me and I came back home with a different attitude, with a power of sorts, I was able to show my father how to become a real man and stand up to the pushy woman who was my mother, God rest her soul.”

“Amen,” Cam muttered.

Billy smiled and nodded at Cam, knowing he was saying that for his great, great grandmother. “My family dynamic is a long story, so I won’t go there. Actually, delving into the roles of males and females is also a very long discussion, so I will only touch on a few highlights, since I know you all know and understand these things. Right to the heart of the matter, men and women are not equal in most things. They are not the same in most things. However, they are equal in a few things. They are equal in God’s love. They are equal in God’s grace. They are equal in importance. There cannot be one without the other.

On the average, men are stronger, faster, and bigger. They are not smarter, but they

do think differently. Women, on the average are smaller and weaker. They are not smarter, but they do think differently, on the average. I keep saying on the average because of course there are exceptions to all of these things. Those exceptions require a little more planning, but all can find their niche, find their mate and be exceedingly joyful. Some think a stronger woman requires a weaker man. Not exactly true. A strong woman, in order to fulfill her calling as a woman, requires an even stronger man. Not a stronger man who can boss her around or take advantage of his physical strength, but a stronger man who is capable of standing beside her and protecting her and leading her.

"Here's the important part, and since I've read Grandmaster Kino's book, I know he agrees with me in this. Each person in a marriage must have admiration and respect for each other. This is important, even above the love part. For, as God's children, our love comes easy. Admiration and respect, not so easy. If you admire and respect the person you love, and both of you have God first in your life, this is pretty much an unbreakable union.

"But what are the roles? Since the beginning of time, the man provided for and protected the woman. The woman cared for the man and provided him with children. Both roles are extremely important. In this modern day, this has changed a bit. In many households, the woman has also had to help provide. In most cases, this is not your husband's fault, but the shape of the economy. So, we work around it. Still, if you keep the original roles straight in your mind and work together, it can be done. Do things in this order. God first. Spouse second. Children third. Ahhh, that is where I lose a lot of people. They want to put the children first. They don't understand. The very best thing you can do for your child is to nurture your spouse and worship God. When a child knows that his parents love, respect and admire each other and that their bond is unbreakable, then they are stable, confident, and won't do things to try to play one parent against the other because they know it is impossible to break their solidarity.

"Men, be masculine, be strong, and if you are not, get that way. I'm not talking about becoming some he-man beefcake and I'm not just talking physically, but mentally and spiritually. There is nothing more attractive to women than a masculine man who works hard and takes care of his family without moaning and groaning. Women, there is nothing more attractive than a feminine woman who is strong and works hard and takes care of her family without complaint. Work together as a team. The rewards are pure joy.

Lately it's become a thing for women to demean their man publicly. Or to make him make his own meals. Or to give you expensive gifts. Or for those who date, it's become a thing that the man isn't worth anything if he doesn't spend a bunch of money on you. This is purely disgusting to the Lord and it makes women look bad and the good women, don't agree with you. So, stop being a stereotype; shopping for shoes, overspending, expecting expensive gifts, or nagging. Nagging is a real problem. You want your husband to listen to you? Stop nagging. And one more thing, and it too is important; keep the romance alive physically." He looked around a moment. "And there are young people present so I will not go into any further explanation about that.

"Men, your strength is not to use to get your way. Your strength should be strong

enough that you can allow some leeway and only assume authority when absolutely necessary. This is a quiet strength. Be strong and kind and calm at all times. However, hush that nagging woman immediately," Billy said with a laugh, making everyone else laugh.

"Bottom line, most people are surprised to find that if we stick as much as possible to the roles God designed from the beginning, you will live peaceful and happy lives. God designed Adam first. Sorry, ladies that's just the way it is. He designed women *from* man, as a helpmeet *for* man, as someone for him to love and care for and share his innermost secrets with, and as his partner and companion. He designed women as the only ones to have babies. Sorry ladies, that is what you were designed to do. Have children, love and nurture them. Some women can't. Why? Well, it's not to punish you. How will you handle it?

"And, by the way, when you conceive, it is not just your body anymore. Sorry ladies, that is the truth of it. You were not designed to kill your babies. Stop it. If you don't want to have children, do not have sex. If you're not married, do not have sex. Men, if you're not married, get control of your carnal selves, get control over your bodies and save it. *That* is real strength.

"Like I said, this is a very deep and complicated subject, and each case is different, so it's hard to put a blanket over it, but I've tried to squish it into a very large nutshell, a coconut maybe," he said with grin.

Everyone chuckled. "And now, I will call upon a most impressive young man to speak, Gabriel Tanner."

Gabe smiled and drew a fearful breath. Everyone shifted in their chairs in anticipation, wondering what subject Jesus would have Gabe speak about.

"So, like, okay, well, let me just begin by saying that I feel very unworthy to be asked to speak to this group of extremely powerful people whom I love and respect so much. I feel very much out of my league." He stopped and smiled and went on. "And since none of you said anything to that, I'm thinkin' you might agree with me about that."

"Well, you're thinkin' wrong," JoJo said quickly. "We didn't bother to argue the point with you because you wouldn't believe us anyway. It's a moot point."

"Well said, JoJo," Eric said quickly. "Again, Gabe, we don't second guess God. He placed you at this table with the rest of us. You are not only part of the league, but a star player. Now go ahead and shine that light."

Gabe swallowed and nodded. "Okay. Thank you, sir. Okay, so, the Lord showed me a dream last night. It was actually like a movie of something that I experienced for real when I was driving through a construction zone on the highway in California. So, like there is this place where they're doing some work on the highway on I-5 just north of Laguna Beach and some lanes were shut down and it goes down to just two lanes, and the speed limit goes down from 65mph to 45mph. Um, so, most people don't go all the way down to forty-five, but some do." He glanced at his father. "I usually go down to at least fifty, or, maybe fifty-five." He stopped and grinned. "Just being honest."

Everyone smiled.

"But anyway, there are still two lanes, so the people that don't want to slow all the way down to forty-five, can just pass the ones who do, right? And so, that's what I was doing. I was passing the cars on the right who were actually obeying the work zone speed limit because I was running a little late. It was good for a few minutes, but then I came up on a car that was in the left lane, but he too was only going forty-five and he was driving right beside a car in the right lane, also going forty-five. So, I, and all the cars behind me were stuck, having to go the speed limit because this one guy wouldn't get over and allow us to pass. I admit, it was pretty irritating, so, like, I had to make myself be patient. I mean, I'd been speeding. And this guy was obeying the speed limit. And in a way, he was forcing everyone else to obey the speed limit too, so, he was doing a good deed, kind of, right?" Gabe stopped and made a face. "He was forcing everyone to drive more safely and obey the law, right? So, I made myself be patient until finally the work zone ended and I was able to go around the guy.

"Well, last night, the Lord used that to explain something to me. He explained that not all things that seem good, are good. He told me, 'What you were witnessing, Gabriel, is Satan's plan.' It seems good, but it is not good. And what the Lord told me, as a few of you have mentioned, overlaps with what others have already said. He said, Satan's plan is to get rid of freewill. When the antichrist takes over this world during the tribulation, you will not have a choice. In exchange for him stopping the wars and giving you food and shelter and equality, you must worship him. You will have no choice, well, except death. That is Satan's plan.

"When Dr. Iman spoke about our bodies, keeping them healthy and strong, it goes along with another thing the Lord showed me. He said, Satan started a thing, a trend I guess, where we accept and even applaud ourselves for being overweight. Then Satan's plan was to not only introduce foods that cause disease and destroy, but to introduce poisons that will be forced injected into our bodies that do more than cause bad health. They actually change our DNA.

"Master Chen spoke about vindication which also ties into what Mr. Quinn spoke about which was victimhood and with what Mr. Sawyer said about justice. Satan's plan is to play up the victimhood. He plays on our need for vindication and fairness and justice and equality which causes us to search for safe spaces and we can't stand for anyone to have any other opinion than our own. As was said earlier, this keeps us fighting and arguing. There will be no peace. Mr. Vasilyev spoke about us giving up the will to live. That is exactly what Satan wants us to feel. And like Mr. Alvarez said, he definitely wants us to forget the love, which is what gives us the will to live."

Gabe took a breath and looked at his notes. "Sorry, my brain is a little fried and I lost my line of thought for a minute."

Logan, JoJo and young Eric all grinned because Gabe was so completely unpretentious.

Gabe looked back up and smiled. "The Lord told me to pay close attention to what everyone else said and show how it links to Satan's plans. I asked Him to please give me the words because I'm not that smart and I was on a roll for minute there, but then I had a brain fart. Oh, uh, sorry, I mean, like, a little glitch."

They all laughed softly.

"Oh how I love you, Gabe," Rose said softly.

Gabe's face reddened. "Um, love you too, Rose."

"What do you think caused the 'glitch'," Brody asked.

Gabe shrugged.

"I know what caused it," Daisy said as she squeezed Brody's hand.

"Okay, so, fill me in, sis," Gabe said, his eyebrows raised.

She shrugged. "The last thing you said was love gives us the will to live. And your mind went straight to Taylor."

Gabe's eyes opened wide.

"Is she right?" Justice asked.

Gabe nodded. "Well, now that she said it, um, yeah, I think she's right."

Again, everyone at the table laughed softly.

Gabe cleared his throat. "So, anyway, where was I? Hmm, okay, so, then Mr. Musani gave a beautiful talk about honesty, about teaching truth, and about keeping it real, which is exactly the very opposite of Satan, because Satan is a liar. In John, I think it's chapter eight, he calls Satan the father of lies. He says there is no truth in him. So, we must be absolutely honest in order to keep away from Satan's plan. Then Reverend Clark spoke of God's grace, of the gift of life that Jesus offered us on the cross, which totally thwarts Satan's plans. Totally and completely. So then, Satan went after the most beautiful thing there is on this planet, which is the family, the love of a family, the love between a man and a woman who were meant to be together.

"How better to destroy the family than to have women and men turn against each other. Confuse the roles. Confuse the genders. Build resentment. The pendulum swings one way when men hurt, abuse, use and rape women, and then the pendulum swings the other way when women refuse to need men and betray them or use them only for their ability to provide. The fights over divorce and child custody is enough to make everyone steer clear of ever getting married and having a family. And yet, the most joy, besides being in the presence of God, is to be in the presence of your family. But Satan is sly. He knows what he's doing. He and his demons whisper to us constantly. They truly do follow us around like a lion looking for someone to devour.

"So, like has been said about grace, we are asked to live a certain way, not to save us, for the gift is free. We are asked to live a certain way to thwart Satan's plans, to fight the enemy, and to save others. We are God's warriors. I'm not talking about just the twelve. I'm not talking about just those in this room, but all of us who love Jesus, who believe in Him and who love goodness, and honesty and truth. Let me end by reading this scripture which Mr. Johansen mentioned earlier. It is in Philippians, chapter four, verses four through nine. It says; 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,

whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.'"

Gabe smiled and looked up and around him. "That's a great scripture, isn't it? Anyway. I'm done and obviously, the Lord would have me call on Grandmaster Kino." Gabe rose, turned toward the man and bowed.

Eric smiled, rose, and returned the gesture of honor. He then took his seat and smiled at the people sitting around the table. Strong emotions rose as he looked from face to face. "There is not much more for us to say. You have all covered well the subjects God gave you. This discourse is life in a nutshell." He stopped and laughed softly. "As many of you said you were trying to do, give a nutshell version of your given subject. You did a wonderful job and I'm thinking, this discourse should be transcribed and put into a book, the story of the twelve, all of your encounters with your angel, and today's Words from Jesus. How blessed are we?"

He looked around again and nodded. "Well now, I can't think of a finer group of people than the ones I'm looking at, except, we're missing the ladies, and that actually, is the first part of the message the Lord asked me to give." He looked at Jeffy. "Honey, did Jesus speak to you and tell you there is a fourth power?"

Jeffy's eyes opened wide and then she smiled and nodded. "Yes sir. He said that added to the twelve are four powers; the power of three generations, the power of brotherhood, the power of friendship and one more that was always present with us. And I asked Him if it was the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and He said, no, the fourth power was also an earthly power, like the other three."

Eric nodded. "And you have no idea what the other power is?"

"Well, Daddy, I try not to speculate so that when the answer comes, I can hear the words clearly and they aren't colored by my own imagination."

"Ach, well done," Billy said softly, making everyone smile and nod.

"Well, Jesus told me what that fourth power is," Eric said. "He told me it was what brought us all into this world. The fourth power is, are, females. The women. The mothers. The sisters. The daughters. They have a strong power of love and protection that permeates everything if they are living close to God and honoring the path God has set them on. They are strong, because they are many. They are so strong, they don't have to be present. Their love extends across cities, towns, countries, oceans and circles the earth. Several of you have shared the things your wives shared with you while you've been here in Pine Forest. They were doing their best to uplift us while we are away fighting demons. Thinking of them as we battled here, put smiles on our faces and gave us the nudges we needed to stay strong against the evil. I'm honored to be able to tell you all that our Father God says our females are the fourth power."

He looked around. There was silence as the men's thoughts went to their wives and daughters and sisters and fiance's and girlfriends.

It was a woman, Lizzy Tanner, who softly spoke. "This is a beautiful tribute, Grandmaster Kino, and I'm grateful that all of my daughters are here to hear this and understand the importance of what they do, what they say, and how they act each day,

and all glory to God," she said.

Keegan smiled at his wife. Gabe's eyes teared up once again.

"I also know they wouldn't want me to dwell," Eric said, "therefore I will move on to the other subject Jesus spoke to me about, and that is, priorities."

He paused and smiled. "It's really that simple. All of the things you each were given to speak about, none of them can take place without the correct priorities. So then, what are the correct priorities? Sometimes it's easier to show negative, so that we can see the positive, or to show the darkness so that we can recognize the light, so allow me to do this by using examples. A marriage where the kids are given priority makes the husband and wife quickly forget that their spouse is important and they forget the love that brought them together in the first place. The marriage ends and the battle for custody, as always, is hurtful and damaging to all involved. But had the couple prioritized each other, and together loved the kids after that, the marriage would have a better chance.

"However, still, temptations and misunderstandings can get in the way, and things can go south very quickly when roles become unclear. The roles of male and female are important, as in Billy's message. Why would roles become unclear? Why would that happen? Because they put each other first and not God. When God is first, it becomes easy, and your roles are clear. You will not get confused. If you obey God and keep His commandments, you don't get angry because you're tired, you don't disrespect your wife, because she is like part of your body, you don't commit adultery or dishonor your marriage. So, the point I'm making is, priorities are ultra important. In a marriage, God first. Spouse second. Then kids.

"In a career choice, put God first. Mission first. Integrity and morality and honesty first, which translates to God first. Providing for your family is the reason for your work, so, family second. Not fame. Not fortune. Not your own glory. Though you must honor God by honoring yourself, so look to God's will, find His path for you and you will thrive. The love of money, the wanting to be rich so that you can lay around on your yacht or travel around the world cannot be your priority for your career path. Serving God is your priority. What talent has He given you? What will you do with what He has given you? He gave you life, as Lev pointed out. Live it in his honor and also in honor of those loved ones you have lost.

"As Sakchai and Thomas pointed out, vindication and justice will be forthcoming, but should not be a priority. Only God can bring them. So, you must not ache for that but you must instead, trust God. Choose to trust God. Your whole life is a choice as Henrik pointed out. Choose God. Do we do that constantly? In all honesty, as Andrew pointed out? Do we offer love and let our light shine, like Miguel was given to speak about, I think because he did that so beautifully when he cared so lovingly for Lev.

"I've spoken about putting God first, then wife, family, career. But we cannot do those things well if we don't take care of our own bodies, which was Ces' message to us. We cannot take care of all that we need to do if we do not prioritize our own health. An empty cup nourishes no one. That is the reason our family gets up so early to work out and nourish out bodies every day. Then, if we have a busy day, we know, we've

already taken care of that important part of the day. We make it a priority in our lives also because we must practice what we preach and our livelihood revolves around the use of our bodies and keeping them strong and healthy. So, let me move on.

"How do we relate priorities to Alo's message about victimhood? First, he is right. This victim mindset is destroying our country, it's destroying the family, and it will destroy the world. The victim mentality is a selfish one. Woe is me is all about who? Me! It is certainly not putting God first. Poor me. I hurt so much. I'm having such a hard time. I'm so sad. I've been so abused. Etcetera.

"If you are putting God first, then whatever comes your way, whatever hardship or pain, you are willing to pick up your burden, your cross, so to speak, and carry it for however long God wants you to do so. Doing that sets an example for others to see the power of God in our lives. It helps them to see that with God, we can find the strength to move on. I know of a person who'd recently been beaten badly. This person was sinking deep into victimhood for a minute. But then, she went out to help some homeless people, and she forgot all about her own troubles. Doing God's work, being in service to others, it heals better than any counseling session a person could have."

Eric stopped and nodded at Keegan and then Lizzy. "I will repeat what has already been pointed out today. The Tanner family has just demonstrated this putting God first in a spectacular way. Their prayers were always for healing of their beloved family members, and then letting go and telling God they will trust Him, that they will accept his good and perfect will for their family and that no matter what, they will not turn away from Him, but will pick up whatever heavy burden the Lord has given them and carry it without complaint. We are all humbled by their courage and strength."

Keegan cleared his throat. "Um, Grandmaster Kino, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have to be honest. That burden, I mean, I was struggling very hard with lifting that burden. We all were."

Eric smiled and nodded. "Your humility is noted, however, it's not a bad thing that you were struggling. It was your willingness to try to lift that burden up onto your shoulder, for God and for your family, that showed your priorities were straight. It was a beautiful thing to witness Keegan. And watching you lead your family, I know exactly why Gabe is the wise and strong and humble and special young man that he is."

Gabe looked down, his cheeks reddening, as young Eric patted his back.

Eric looked around. "We all struggle with what the Lord has asked us to do. We all fail at times. We make mistakes. Sometimes willfully. Thank goodness for God's grace, the subject Ronny was given to speak about. Thank you, Jesus for your amazing gift. Oh how we love you and oh how grateful are we to have your gift of grace. Your payment. Your forgiveness." Eric nodded and sighed as he felt the Holy Spirit move through him so strongly.

"Well, that brings us to Gabe's message, pointing out Satan's plans. We must be very awake and aware and not be deceived by Satan's plans as he works so hard to deceive us here in the last days. And we ARE in the last days. We are very close to the end. I think the Lord is telling us, if we stick to the messages given today, we will not be deceived. And more, if we focus on teaching the messages we received today, we

will be able to help many others find their way through the maze. And one last thing. Sometimes we might not know where the Lord is taking us. We must take just the next small step, and that step reveals the next."

He nodded and smiled. "Thank you again, to Pine Forest Inn management and staff. Such a fine group of people. And thank you to all of you who were not the twelve, who uprooted your schedules at the drop of a hat and flew across the country to help with this great undertaking. I realize you'll be swamped with makeup work at your place of business or your schools. I also realize that you would say what I would say, and that is that there is no need for thanks. With that in mind, let's call on someone to pray and we will dismiss. Jodi has told me that there is a delicious going away dinner planned for us this evening, since we are all leaving early in the morning, so I hope you will all join, but I know some of you are tired and may just want a quiet evening to yourselves. Ahh, a choice to make!" Eric said with a laugh and then nodded at Billy Wallace. "Billy, I feel inclined to call on you to end our meeting with a prayer, if you would be so inclined."

"Ach, indeed I will," Billy said.

✝✝✝

Romans 12:9-12

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Still January 31st, 2:00 PM PST Friday Afternoon
UCLA, Los Angeles California

Agent Joon Kim watched as Jordan Brooks and Colton Bartlett approached him after a grueling workout on the softball field. They were soaked with sweat, and covered with dirt. Today was a fitness test, the 150 yard shuttle, where the softball players are assessed for their anaerobic fitness. They must sprint twenty-five yards back and forth six times, totaling 150 yards, as quickly as possible. UCLA coaches demand a time of thirty-two seconds or less with seventy seconds of rest between sprints. The athletes cannot play until they passed the test and the girls hadn't fared very well.

Kim smiled kindly at them. "Well, that wasn't so great," he said quietly.

Jordan sighed. "Thanks so much for the input, Agent Kim. You just get right to the point, don't you?"

He shrugged. "Honesty is always best and it saves time. Are you still wanting to go straight back to your apartment and get cleaned up?"

"Yes sir," Jordan said. "And Colton is coming too."

He nodded. "Good, so then, maybe I can offer some off-hand coaching assistance to the both of you."

"Well, I'm up for any advice," Colton said.

"Good. So here it is. The key to a great shuttle time is in the turns, of course."

"Of course," Jordan said with a grin. She nodded at Colton. "Agent Kim was good friends with the South Korean National Softball team coach."

He nodded. "Yes I was, and I helped coach sometimes and I know what I'm talking about. It's the turns. You'll see. Lazy turns or cautious turns eat up your time. You have to focus, not just slow down, turn and go again, but, focus. You must accelerate just as you come out of the turn, long stride in the middle, and then sprint hard into the turn, slow at just the right time, and again, accelerate just as you come out of the turn. Your acceleration is too late. Your stride is short in the middle. You are not picking up speed as you approach the next turn. So, accelerate, stride, accelerate, slow, turn, accelerate. How you internalize this is the key to improving your time."

"Internalize?" Colton asked.

Kim nodded. "Yes. Um, make it automatic or reflexive."

Jordan nodded. "And you do that through repetition."

"Correct." Agent Kim smiled and then frowned at the alarm that sounded. He stopped walking, held up his hand and immediately pulled his phone from his jacket pocket. "I have a breech," he mumbled as he tapped something and watched the scene that played on his phone.

Curious, Jordan and Colton leaned over his shoulder to peer at the phone. They saw

what seemed to be a live-feed of the cameras on Agent Kim's SUV. A man in a black hoodie was crawling out from under the vehicle.

"Is that your car?" Jordan asked.

Agent Kim only nodded and looked up. "You two stand back to back and cover your sixes a moment." He then hit another button.

"Yes, Agent Kim, how can I help you?"

"Who's on call?"

"Senior Agent Trout."

"Put me through please."

The call went through immediately.

"Agent Kim, whatcha got?" Trout said.

"Sir, my car has just been breeched. My readout says it's a tracker. Can you confirm for me?"

It took only a minute. "Yes, tracker is confirmed. No explosives. Any idea who it is?"

"Yes sir, I have an idea. I'd like to send you the camera feed. There is a place where some light shone on his face. Can you blow it up for me so I can ID him?"

"Yes. Send the feed and give us a few minutes."

"Thank you, sir. So, if it's who I think it is, then the only reason he would want to track me is to see if I'm in the area with Jordan."

"Yes, or, possibly to see if you are near *him*."

Agent Kim thought a minute. "Yes. He'll want to know if I'm on to him."

"Which you are. And you were gonna track him again once you drop Jordan off, correct?"

"Yes sir."

"Okay then," Trout said. "Simple enough. Take her to the apartment. Agent Barrow should be there any minute, and when he gets there, swap the tracker from your car to his car. Then *you* go track the hell out of *Mason*. See what he does all weekend. Every single thing. Document everything. Maybe we'll turn up something. Go ahead and get Jordan home. She's probably a little shaken up."

Agent Kim glanced over his shoulder at her and then nodded. "Yes, I believe you are correct." He pushed a few buttons. "Okay, I sent the feed."

"I'll be back with you shortly," Trout said. "And I will have Agent Barrow accompany the ladies inside and do another sweep of the apartment, both inside and out. Is Jordan using the phone you gave her?"

"Yes sir."

"Tell her and her roommates not to discuss what is going on until Agent Barrow clears the premises."

"Roger that, sir."

Trout immediately ended the call and Agent Kim nodded at the girls. "Let's move. Head straight to the car."

Five minutes later he opened the back so they could dump their bags. They jumped in and he immediately locked their doors. His phone beeped as he got into his seat. He

pulled up the picture, enlarged from the feed he'd sent to Agent Trout. Sure enough, there he was, Mason Cole, his hood pulled back slightly because it caught on the edge of the tire.

"Is it him?" Jordan asked immediately, her voice shaky.

He sighed and nodded, eyeing her in the rearview mirror. "It is."

"What is he thinking?" Jordan asked, unable to control the hitch in her voice.

"I believe he is demonstrating psychopathic behaviors, so, it is very hard to know what he's thinking, because sometimes it is not logical."

"So, you're saying he's not just your normal stalker, but is a psychopath?"

"Well, I'm not a doctor, but his behavior is suspicious." He looked in the mirror when he heard her whimper. "It's gonna be okay, Jordan. We won't let him hurt you. I've got him in my sights. We will take care of this problem."

She nodded. "Are Colton or Jackie in any danger?"

"To be honest— possibly. I will speak to Jason and make sure you are all protected, with Colton's and Jackie's permission, of course."

"Uh, yeah, you can protect me," Colton said quickly. "Except, you know, I can't pay for it."

"I'm pretty sure the Kinos will take care of the expense," Agent Kim assured.

"They will," Jordan said positively. "I mean, we will," she said with a smile.

"God bless Eric Kino the third," Colton said with a smile, as Jordan nodded.

✝✝✝

Still January 31st, 5:30 PM EST Friday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

About the same time that Agent Jeff Davis received a call from Senior Agent Trout, Jason received one from his cousin, Joon Kim and young Eric received one from his fiancé, Jordan.

"Well hello there, Two-three," young Eric said.

"Hi," she said softly.

Eric's eyes narrowed and he sat up straight. "What's wrong?"

That got the attention of his brothers, plus Charlie Stewart, who'd been lounging on the front porch of the Inn with them. Their white rocking chairs came to a halt and Charlie, Gabe, JoJo and Logan all got quiet to allow young Eric his conversation with his fiancé.

Jordan quickly explained about Mason trying to tag Agent Kim's vehicle and then Agent Barrow having to do another sweep of their apartment, which turned up a small camera on the outside corner of Jordan's bedroom window.

When young Eric was silent, Jordan spoke again.

"Eric? Are you still there?"

He heaved a sigh. "Yep, I'm here, babe. I'm just trying to get my temper under control. I think I'll have a word with him when I get back tomorrow."

"Eric? Would you like us to leave?" JoJo asked.

Eric looked up. "Oh, no, sorry. Jordan just told me that Mason Cole guy, he's taken things to another level. Jordan, can I put you on speaker?"

"Sure. We have no secrets from your brothers anyway. Are they the only ones there? I mean, JoJo, Logan, and Gabe?"

"Well, there's one more. The three you named and Charlie Stewart. He's about to be fifteen and is a really good guy."

Charlie smiled at the thought of these amazing guys including him and calling him a good guy.

"Oh yeah, I remember Charlie from Thanksgiving," Jordan said.

"Okay, Jordan, I'm putting it on speaker, babe. Go ahead and tell them what you just told me."

The five guys listened quietly as Jordan told the story again, adding a little more detail.

"Anyway, Three," Jordan went on. "You can't go see him, because first, it would mess up their investigation and second, Agent Kim is tailing him right now, and from what Agent Barrow told me, Mason is not in the area. The last few times Agent Kim followed him, he stayed around here, near his own apartment, but this time he's driving way out past Sunland and into the canyons."

"Is he alone?" Gabe asked.

"Mason?"

"No, I mean, Agent Kim. Because I hope this Cole guy isn't leading him out on a wild goose chase to try to take him out."

"Well, I don't think that's what's happening because Mason put a tracker on Agent Kim's car and he doesn't know that it has been transferred over to Agent Barrow's car, which is right outside the apartment, so Mason doesn't know that Agent Kim is following him. He thinks he's here watching over me."

"What if Mason did the same thing?" Logan asked. "I mean, what if Mason found Agent Kim's tracker on his car and moved it."

"It doesn't work like that," Gabe said. "I mean, it can, but since this guy is into tech stuff, I'm sure they went high tech too. So, they won't use an actual tracker on the car. Mason Cole's car is probably being tracked by an AI drone and transmitted to Agent Kim. And if the tiny coded decal or the small patch of paint were found and somehow removed, which is highly unlikely, it would notify us. Uh, I mean, it would notify Agent Kim."

The guys all smiled at Gabe. "You were right the first time, Tanner. You are Ameritech now. Which I'm realizing, is very cool," young Eric said.

"Anyway," Jordan went on. "Agent Kim says it's much worse than just some unbalanced stalker dude. He thinks he's showing psychopathic tendencies and is capable of much worse, and he's gonna ask if Ameritech can also protect Jackie and Colton, because he's off balance enough to possibly hurt them too."

The guys were silent a moment and then young Eric spoke. "Jordan, I'm sorry I'm not there, but I'll be home tomorrow morning. We're leaving here at six in the morning, and we'll be landing there at seven in the morning. I'll be to you by eight. As a matter of fact, why don't you go to my house?"

"I can't. I have a fitness practice in the morning."

"It can't be skipped?"

"Absolutely not. If we don't pass the 150 yard shuttle, we don't play and I have to work on my technique, because so far I'm not doing great."

He sighed. "Well, I wish I was there to help you."

"You can come watch. You said you'd be here by eight and I'll be on the field at that time. Maybe you can watch and give me some pointers."

"Okay, that sounds like a deal. So until tomorrow, you feel like your safe?"

"Yes, I guess. I mean, both Jackie and Colton are here, and we have the pepper spray, and the alarm is on and Agent Barrow is watching over us. I just need you, that's all. It's been so hard to be away from you."

"Yeah, and it hasn't been a bed of roses here either, though we can't complain because we've been witness to a whole bunch of miracles and Lily and Iris are alive and well, so, it was worth it."

"Yes, it was," Jordan said quickly. "And I didn't mean to make it sound like I'm being so selfish, like poor pitiful me. I'm so happy and relieved that they're okay and that everything worked out and that's really all that matters. I guess I'm just feeling a little scared."

"I get it, babe. Well, I'll be there in the morning and maybe I can take you to lunch after your practice."

"That sounds wonderful. I love you, Three."

"I love you, Two-three. Hang in there, baby."

"I will. I just needed to hear your voice. Um, so, bye guys, JoJo and Logan and Gabe and Charlie. Maybe I'll see you guys too."

"Bye, Jordan, chin up, kiddo, see ya soon," they all murmured.

Young Eric ended the call with a frown and a sigh.

"She's gonna be okay," JoJo said. "But let's send up a prayer for protection."

Gabe nodded. "Let's do it."

"You in a hurry?" JoJo asked.

"Yes, actually. I have a lot to do and after dinner I have to have a conference with Grandmaster Kino and my dad and your Dad, and Justin Lee about a letter I received and I need to spend some time with Iris and the twins before I leave in the morning— as much time as possible."

They all nodded. Young Eric spoke. "Well, you have us intrigued about the letter. Is it important? A lucrative offer or something of that nature?"

Gabe shook his head. "I wish that's all it was. No, it came last week and my mom gave it to me today. It was written from the *Pine County Sheriff's Office Law Enforcement Center holding facility*, and the writer was— Mia Casellas."

"The girl who had you kidnapped? What does she want?" JoJo asked.

"I'm not sure what her true motives are, but it sounds like she wants to ask me questions about God, about life. She says I touched her with the things I said to her and she wants me to like, counsel her on her journey to be saved."

"Do you trust her?"

Gabe shook his head. "I don't know. Not really. But like, I do wanna help her if she

really wants to be helped and not just get under my skin. I mean, really, like my dad said, the poor kid never stood a chance. So, like, if she could rise up and make something of herself even in prison, I think that would be cool. But it could just be a ploy to get leniency, though I don't think that's gonna happen because for kidnapping and bodily injury the law is pretty clear. Still, the judge could make any ruling he wants. And the trial is coming up soon."

"Oh yeah, I forgot all about that. Why did it take so long to go to trial?"

Gabe shrugged. "They said because there was so much evidence and stuff to be investigated and then the discovery process for the defense, and some of the pre-trial motions have set things back."

"Did she plead innocent?"

"Yeah, and I thought that was crazy, but then they told me it's pretty standard, because it lets her attorneys plead for lesser charges or maybe a possibility of parole. I also think what happened to her as a kid will play into it. I don't even mind her getting out, if she really is trying to make something of her life, but that's the problem. Is she for real?"

"Well," Logan began with a smile. "That— sounds like a song lyric."

They all were quiet as they thought about it. *"Is she really trying to make something of her life, that's the problem, is she for real?"*

JoJo chuckled and shoved Logan.

"What?" Logan asked.

"Everything sounds like a song lyric to you."

Logan shrugged. "Sorry. I can't help it."

Gabe shrugged. "Don't be sorry. I think it would make a very sad song that would pull at everyone's heartstrings. But anyway, kidnapping with serious bodily injury is life, no parole. So, is she for real or is she hoping I might speak for her and get the judge to be lenient? I don't know and that's what the little meeting is gonna be about."

"Well, that's interesting. So, Gabe, tell us, do you forgive her?"

Gabe nodded. "Of course."

"You're such a good guy."

"Maybe not. I mean, if she'd been able to take out my dad like she planned, I'm not sure that forgiving would be so easy." He stopped and smiled. "Anyway, guys, let's pray."

JoJo nodded. "I got this."

They stood in a circle, put their hands on each others shoulders and prayed.

Meanwhile, Jason, Joey, Jeffy, Cam and Keegan had a quick meeting about the phone calls that Jeff and Jason had just received.

Keegan shook his head. "I hate to sound paranoid, but I think it's time to take this Cole guy a little more seriously. He's not just obsessed with Jordan, he's acting on his obsession, and that's the cause of a whole lotta crime scenes."

Jason nodded. "I agree. There's got to be more to this guy then we're seeing. Let's wait to see what Joon finds out this weekend as he tails Cole and then we'll go all in."

"Let's keep a drone overwatch on Joon while he's tailing this guy," Joey suddenly

said. “Got a feelin’ in my gut.”

Jason nodded. “Well, Deputy Chief Adams, your gut feelings are good enough for me. Jeff, take care of that.”

“Roger that,” Jeff said and moved aside to call Senior Agent Trout.

Jason sighed. “I think I’m gonna call intel and get them to do a deep dive on this Mason Cole.”

Cam happened to glance out the office window and smiled. He nodded toward the window. “Well now, that’s a pleasant scene,” he said softly.

The other men moved to the window to see five strong young men standing in a circle praying. It was definitely a scene that lifted hearts.

✝✝✝

Still January 31st, 7:30 PM EST Friday Evening

Pine Forest Country Inn, Pine Forest, Georgia

Gabe didn’t realize he had an audience as he held Iris tightly in his arms and danced and sang to her. “I’ll start walkin’ your way, you start walkin’ mine. We’ll meet in the middle, ‘neath the old Georgia pi-ines, we gain a lotta ground, ‘cause we both give a little, ain’t no road too long, when we meeeet, in the middle.” He spun her around real fast and Iris squealed in delight.

All those sittin’ around in the lobby of the inn had to smile. The bond between that brother and sister was a beautiful thing.

“I’m sure gonna miss you, my little flower,” Gabe said softly.

“I gonna miss you too, Gabe. I wove you so so so so much.”

He sniffed and smiled. “Me too. I mean, I love you so so so so much too. But don’t be sad, okay?”

“I won’t cuz Jesus tode me if I get sad just talk to Him and He would hep me.”

Everyone in the room quieted at her words.

“You talked to Jesus about me?”

“Uh huh. When I was sick and He talked to me under the twee.”

Gabe cleared his throat. “What did He say?”

“Um, He said, you is workin’ fo Him and so I shouldn’t be sad ‘bout dat, I should be happy. He said you is gonna be a vewy stwong waryer for Him and you is gonna hep a whole wot of people so so much. And He said He knows I misses you and He said He would help me if I talk to Him when I’m sad.”

Gabe sniffed and hugged her close, then looked around at all the other people in the room. They were all emotional. Gabe gave a soft laugh. “Right?” He jostled Iris. “Well, Iris, I’m sure glad that Jesus told you that. Now I won’t worry so much about you while I’m away. Thank you for telling me this, because it makes me feel a whole lot better.”

Iris smiled. “You is welcome.”

Gabe chuckled. “You ARE welcome.”

“Sing anudder song, Gabe.”

“Okay, but only if you sing too. Which song do you want?”

“Um, *Do You Wanna Build a Snowman*.”

He chuckled. “Of course you pick *that* song. Okay, let me see if I can remember the words.”

✝✝✝

Still January 31st, 5:00 PM PST Friday Evening

Corner of Gold Creek Canyon Road and Tackle Creek Trailhead, *California*

Agent Joon Kim had to turn around when he got to the metal gate at the private drive where Mason Cole had turned in. He headed back a few miles to have a three-way conference with Senior Agent Trout, and the guy on overwatch, who was currently Agent Jared Fulton.

“Can you scan for cameras or sensors on the gate?” Kim asked.

“Scanning,” Fulton answered. “There are no cameras on the gate, though there are a few placed around the property. However, if the gate is opened, it will send off a signal. If you want, I can mimic the sensor’s data signature and he will see the gate as closed. Still, a car going up the gravel drive is gonna be heard. If you choose to travel on foot, you can simply jump the gate and I can easily guide you around the cameras.”

“Is the drone close enough for remote audio surveillance?” Trout asked.

“Yes sir,” Agent Fulton replied. “We are currently at 800 feet but there is no conversation taking place at the moment. No phone calls. No music, or TV.”

“Do you have a heat signature on Cole?” Trout asked.

Agent Fulton took a few moments. “Yes sir. He’s in the shower.”

“What else do you see?”

“I have four structures, sir. A small home, right behind that is a shed, and about fifty yards to the right of the home there are two apparent shipping containers. Cole is the only heat signature in the home, but there is another, sir. There seems to be someone inside one of the containers. Cole’s vehicle is parked behind the first shipping container closest to his house and I’m picking up a signature. The second container is twenty feet farther. Noone there. There are a whole lotta cameras and might take me a while to access all of them.”

“Understood,” Trout said. “And let me know when you have that ready.”

“Roger that.”

“I’m gonna head in on foot,” Agent Kim said. “I’m gonna drive up a little closer and camo the vehicle. I’ll let you know when I’m ready for you to guide me around the cameras, Agent Fulton.”

“Roger.”

Fifteen minutes later, Agent Kim circled around the first container. “Wonder who’s in here,” he mumbled. “Agent Fulton, have you hacked the cameras yet?”

“I have hacked the camera in the home and I have audio. Cole took a shower and ate some dinner and is now sitting down at his computer. I’m about to run a remote access and stream his computer.”

“Can you access the camera’s history on the containers?” Trout asked.

“Yes sir, I have, but so far the only thing I see is Cole going in and out of the first container several times, going back eight weeks. He takes plastic tote containers in and out every few weeks.”

"You don't see when the person in there arrived?"

"No sir."

"You're absolutely positive it's a person?"

"Yes sir. At first the signature was formless, and I thought it might be a large animal, but I involved AI and it has become clear. It is a human, sir."

"Well then, this is not good," Trout mumbled. "I need to call Chief Davis. Get me more information. Everything you can find."

"Yes sir," Fulton said and then paused. "Sir, I'm watching Cole's computer screen now. He is pulling up his security cameras. He's looking at his front drive. Now he's checking the other cameras that I had you avoid, Agent Kim. He's checking the cameras around the storage containers. Hold it. He's checking cameras that are *inside* the storage containers. God have mercy."

"What is it?" Agent Kim asked.

"It's a girl, sir."

Agent Trout sighed. "Agent Fulton, details please."

"We definitely have a situation, sir. I'm livestreaming what he sees and I'm sending it to you now. Sir, he has a girl inside the first container, about twenty feet from Agent Kim. She's chained to a wall, but she can move around. She's pacing and appears to be talking to herself. She is very thin. Long blond hair. She's wearing a t-shirt and that appears to be all she's wearing. She has bruises on her face and legs. There is an open plastic tote next to a mattress on the floor. It might have food in it, I can't really see inside the tote, but on the earlier camera footage, Cole was carrying the same plastic totes in and out of the storage unit several times a month. I was only able to go back eight weeks. I will see if I can go further back and find when he brought the girl in."

"Do that, Agent, but keep the livestream. I have to contact Chief Davis and I'm pretty sure the FBI and police will be called in. Agent Kim, remain where you are until we have a tactical action plan."

Trout watched his stream and shook his head in disgust. Cole was pleasuring himself as he watched his hostage. When he finished, he rose and grabbed some keys from a kitchen drawer and headed outside.

"He's coming your way, Agent Kim. Do not intercede."

Kim drew a deep breath. "I copy sir."

"Sir," Agent Fulton said. "I've hacked the camera in the container. Standby for video and audio."

Mason Cole smiled as he unlocked the door to the container and the girl hurried to the mattress and stood in the farthest corner.

"Okay now, little girl, it's okay."

She stood shivering in the corner.

"Guess what?" Mason asked.

She didn't answer but blinked at him.

"I've grown tired of you."

She started to cry.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because I know what that means."

"What do you think you know?"

"It means you're gonna take me out in the woods and kill me, just like you did that Kenley girl."

"Oh, come on now. What makes you think I killed her?"

The girl sniffed. "Because you took her out to the woods and when you came back you had blood all over you and I asked you what happened to her and you said, 'Kenley has gone to meet her maker.' And then you moved me from the other place to this one and said I'm your new girl."

"Well then, aren't you just so smart."

"Please don't kill me."

He sighed. "Well now, I really have no choice. Ya see, I have to make room for my new girl. Of course, she doesn't know she's my girl. She thinks she's gonna marry some big rich famous guy, but that is never gonna happen. But you, Miss Megan, can't be here when she gets here, and I really need to spiff this place up. New bedding, maybe even a dining table and chair, some better lighting. I have to do it up nice for this girl because she's special. But this girl, she's gonna fight. Oh, she's gonna fight so hard. She really is amazing. She's an athlete. A college athlete. She's tough."

"Sir," Agent Fulton said. "Senior Agent Deal is now with us. He'll take over here and I'm going to try to get more information from intel."

"Agent Deal," Trout said quickly. "I have Assistant Chief Davis and Deputy Chief Adams on the line now. Speak with them directly."

"Copy that."

While Ameritech was working at a feverish speed, Chief Jason Lee was making contact with the FBI and the CBI. Computer keys in each center were clicking at a furious speed.

"Chief Adams," Jensen Deal said quickly. "Agent Fulton has found that there was a Kenley Dixson, a college student at *Saint Mary's College of California* who disappeared two years ago."

"Thank you, keep digging."

"Sir, Cole is unlocking the chain that is around the victim's ankle," Deal said as he studied his screen.

Joey studied his screen and grimaced. "He's gonna get rid of her. Agent Kim, follow as long as you can and intervene if necessary. I'm hoping he'll go to the same location and we'll be able to find Kenley Dixson's body, so wait as long as possible. Agent Deal, can you pick up on any weapons?"

"I'm not currently seeing any guns anywhere in the home or on his person. The girl said Cole came back covered in blood, which suggests a knife."

"Agent Kim, LEOs are thirty minutes out. This girl's life is in your hands."

"Roger that, sir," Kim said. "I don't have the advantage of knowing what's going on inside or what's being said, so, keep me informed please."

Joey watched the livestream. "Cole is walking around the inside of the container, looking things over. My guess is he's making design plans for his next victim. Our

current victim is edging her way toward the door. I think she's gonna make a run for it."

Agent Kim braced himself to grab her.

Mason Cole turned abruptly, when he noticed her moving toward the door. She took off but he beat her to it. Grabbing her by the hair, he pulled her back to the mattress. She tried to fight him, but she was obviously in a weakened condition. He slapped her a few times. "Be still," he yelled. "I thought after all this time you would know how to behave." Standing quickly, he grabbed up the chain and locked it back around her ankle.

Megan began to cry. "Please, Mason, let me go."

"I AM gonna let you go, in a manner of speaking."

"When?"

"In just a few minutes. But I forgot, I have to put on my work pants," he said with a grin. "Don't worry. I'll be right back."

"He's locked her back up and is going to the house to change clothes," Joey said quickly.

It was Jason's voice that was heard next. "Jensen, block that sensor on the container door. Joon, go in and place a hearing device in her ear."

"Tell me when the sensor is blocked," Agent Kim said as he headed toward the door. And can you block the cameras at the door and inside?"

"I'll put them on a loop. Thirty seconds," Jensen said.

"Okay, go," Jensen said a half minute later.

Joon Kim headed to the container and slipped inside the door. The girl gasped, her eyes wide. Joon went to her quickly. "Listen, I'm here to rescue you. There's no time to explain. You just have to do what I say right now. He'll be back any minute. I'm going to slip this earpiece in your ear and you'll be able to hear me speak to you. He'll unlock you and take you out to where he intends to end you. But don't worry. I will be right with you, only a few feet away. We want to see where he takes you so that we can recover Kenley's body."

Megan blinked up at him as tears ran down her cheeks.

"Do you understand?" he asked.

She sniffed. "Are— are you real?"

He sighed and placed a hand gently on her face. "I am real. Do you feel that? I can't explain how I found you right now. There's no time." He stood.

"Don't leave me," she begged.

"I'll be right beside you. Trust me. I won't let him hurt you anymore."

"Kim, he's about to exit the house," Jensen said.

"I have to go. Play along. It will all be over in a few minutes," Kim comforted.

Agent Kim left the container and two minutes later, Mason Cole came out of the back kitchen door and headed back to the container. He immediately went inside and smiled at Megan.

"Well now, that's better. How do I look?"

Megan sniffed and looked him over. He wore navy blue, long-sleeved coveralls. Her eyes stopped though, at the strap that held a knife that was now around his leg.

"Please don't do this," was all she said.

Mason frowned. "You are becoming tiresome," he answered her. "Stand up and put your hands together."

"Mason, please," she begged.

He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to her feet. "Do what you're told Megan, or I can make this hurt a whole lot more than you could ever imagine. Now put your hands together."

"Megan," Agent Kim whispered. "Do what he says. I won't let him hurt you. Just do what he says."

Megan put her hands together and Mason went into the deep pockets of the coveralls, pulled out thick zip ties and tightly tied her wrists. He looked around and picked up a pair of jeans and a few other things they assumed to be her clothing. "Hold these," he commanded as he pulled her arms out straight and laid the items on them. He nodded. "Okay, let's go." He stopped. "Oh, wait, one more thing." Reaching inside his other pocket, he pulled out a black sweatband and put it over her head and down over her eyes.

"Why?" she cried.

"Just so you don't getting any ideas that you can make a run for it."

"It's okay, Megan. I've got you," Agent Kim said. "Don't worry. I've got you. I'm waiting out here very close and I will be right behind you as you walk."

Mason held Megan by the hair as he led her out toward the back of the property. They walked almost a mile when he finally came to halt in a copse of trees. He reached up and pulled the headband from her eyes.

Megan blinked. It was dark outside, but it was easy to see that she was standing in the woods next to a deep hole. Her body began to tremble.

"Be still," Agent Kim said. "And when I say 'now', you simply go limp and drop down to the ground. Don't try to help me. Don't try to fight. Just drop down to the ground. Do you understand? If you do, touch your nose."

Shakily, Megan lifted her hands to her nose.

"Well," Mason said, "It's been nice knowing you, sweet Megan." He bent over and pulled a knife from the strap on his leg.

"Now," Agent Kim said firmly.

Megan dropped and Kim charged. Mason Cole was so stunned that he didn't even react. The knife was removed from his broken hand and he was body slammed onto his stomach. As Kim attempted to pull Cole's hands behind his back, he tried to resist, so Kim punched to his face and knocked him unconscious. He cuffed him and turned him on his side, and made sure he was breathing.

"Scene is secure," Kim said as he immediately went to the girl.

She was crying and struggling to stand. He quickly helped her up.

"Okay, sweetheart, I've got you. Hold your hands out so I can cut the zip ties."

She did as ordered. He cut the ties and she looked up into his face.

He smiled at her. "You're okay now. You're okay."

"Thank you," she whispered, her voice shaky.

"Just doing my job," he replied. "So, there should be some police and FBI and some medics here in a few minutes and they are going to take very good care of you. Are you injured?"

She shook her head.

He sighed. Maybe not physically, too much, but definitely emotionally. He smiled kindly. "Megan, I am Agent Kim, from Ameritech. What's your name?"

"Megan Destry."

"It's nice to meet you, Megan. Do you know how long he had you?"

She sniffed and nodded. "He took me on New Years Eve."

"So, exactly a month."

She shook her head. "No, a year and a month," she said, her voice breaking.

She sobbed and he pulled her against his chest and held her. "Okay, sweetheart, okay. You go ahead and cry. I've got you."

"Megan Destry," Jensen read aloud. "She was a student at UC Berkeley. Went missing during a New Years frat party. Her boyfriend was arrested but never charged due to lack of evidence. Parents and two siblings have made posters and still go around putting them up once a month."

"Thank you, Agent Deal and Agent Fulton for you help," Agent Kim said.

"Thank you both indeed," Joey said. "And thank you especially, Joon, for following your gut, because without you, this young lady would be dead and this could have been Jordan's fate as well."

"Not on my watch," Joon Kim said.

"Well that, I believe."

Agent Kim and Megan looked up at the sound of choppers.

"Choppers are here," Kim said.

"Good. And the rest of the army is not far behind," Joey advised. "Keep our victim warm and the perp secure until then. Good work everyone."

✝✝✝

February 1st 9 AM Saturday Morning

Pine Forest Country Inn Cottage #1

Justice Sawyer stood in front of the mirror that was attached to the closet door. He'd just showered and wore nothing but his boxers. Scrutinizing his body, he could see some older tiny cuts on his face and neck, from the front window of the house exploding. There were also some newer cuts, a little larger ones, on his arms and face from the barrage of glass and debris being thrown around on Thursday afternoon as they fought real demons. There was a large bruise on his upper right thigh, from when the tree branch fell. That bruise was beginning to turn a little greenish. Justice turned and tried to look over his shoulder at the wound on his upper back, but he couldn't see it. He only knew he had to get it re-bandaged because he'd gotten it wet. Should he run to the Inn and get Mr. or Mrs. Appel to help him?

Much earlier, Justice headed to the Inn proper to once again say goodbye to everyone that were headed back to Cali, including his grandfather, who'd decided to spend some time with his new colleagues. Justice had thanked them all profusely for

coming to save the day, to save Iris and his Lily. And him, he added in his head. He'd mistakenly thought that they all had no idea how close he'd been to death himself. He'd thought they had no idea of his extent of inner turmoil. But Grandmaster Kino had taken him aside and spoken to him and let him know that he completely understood what Justice had been through. Several others of the twelve had done the same thing. It had surprised Justice, their extent of empathy and love and understanding.

It was when Gabe Tanner pulled him aside and hugged him and prayed over him, that Justice's brave facade had cracked. Gabe was just a kid really, but he was definitely connected to God's wisdom. Gabe told Justice he was a strong warrior and Jesus was pleased with him. He said he knew he would marry Lily and he couldn't even express how happy that made Gabe because it made his sister so happy. He gave thanks in his prayer for God sending a warrior in the form of Justice Sawyer to save his sister, and then said he understood that this path was planned before they'd even been born. After he'd said all that, he shrugged and smiled his young boyish grin and said, "Those were Jesus' words. My words are, I think you're a pretty cool dude, and I'm happy to call you bruh. Let's play some ball next time we get together."

After the large group left the Inn, Justice came back to his cabin to get cleaned up. He smiled as he thought about the words Gabe said to him, and then turned at the knock on the cabin door. Grabbing up his jeans, he quickly pulled them on and hurried to the door. John Appel stood there.

"Oh! Mr. Appel!" Justice said.

John smiled. "Good morning again, Justice. You look disappointed. Were you hoping for someone else?"

Justice smiled and lowered his head. "Maybe." He looked back up. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. May I come in?"

"Oh, sorry, yes sir," Justice said as he backed away from the door.

John came in and set a leather bag down on the small sofa. "Your grandfather told me that you might disobey orders and take a shower and he was concerned that you needed someone to replace the bandage on your back, and I see your hair is wet and so it appears he knows you well."

Justice smiled. "Oh, uh, yes sir. I couldn't go another day without a shower. I was just wondering who I was gonna go find to help me."

"Well, I thought I would handle it for you. As a Marine Raider I am trained in TCCC, which stands for Tactical Combat Casualty Care, so I think I can bandage up your back for you without too much trouble." He motioned with his finger. "Turn around and let me look at what we got here."

Justice turned and felt calloused fingers softly touch his back.

"Yep, no problem. Have a seat over here at the bar and I'll take care of it."

John grabbed his bag, placed it on the bar, pulled out the needed supplies and went to work.

†††

February 1st 8 AM Saturday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Two black limousines and one black van drove slowly up the long winding drive that lead to the front of the Kino home. They carried Eric Kino, Andrew Musani, Henrik Johansen, Alo Quinn, Ces Iman, Sakchai Chen, Lev Vasilyev, Miquel Alvarez, Billy, Cam, Jeffy and Eli Wallace, and Thomas Sawyer, who'd decided to spend some time with the twelve. They were all a little jet lagged, a little worn down, but very calm and at peace. They had traveled to Pine Forest, Georgia on their first mission together, and had been successful. They'd met and fallen in love with a large group of very strong Christians and they'd all learned a lot and found things each of them definitely had to work on.

Ricky, and Gabe had headed to the south Kino estate. Young Eric had headed to UCLA to see Jordan. Mark, JoJo and Logan headed home to be met by Bella, Emily, Raylynn Quinn and Melody Keith. Joey headed home to see his wife, Breez, and his three children, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger. Jeff Davis headed home to be greeted by his wife Mickey and baby Scarlett, his boys, Daniel and Jeremy, and his foster daughters, Brook and Zoe.

Shelley Kino stood in the doorway of the estate. In front of her, five sweet-faced almost three-year-olds, sat obediently, though eagerly, on the first step, waiting for the green light to run down to greet their father. Farther down the large open circular steps, Anna Wallace waited to greet her son and his family, while Hazel Iman and Dani Quinn waited to greet their husbands.

The limos came to a halt and the doors opened before the drivers could get out and open them, so, instead, the drivers headed to the van in the rear and began unloading luggage.

The men all hesitated as they emerged from the vehicles, showing deference and respect to their host, but Eric gestured for them to please go ahead. They each went to grab their bags and headed up.

Alo moved immediately toward the left side of the large circular steps and Dani hurried down to him, a sweet smile on her face. He stopped and held his arms out to her and she slowly put her arms around his neck. She'd been trying to be gentle, but he laughed and squeezed her hard and lifted her off her feet. It was just a few inches off the ground, but it was remarkable.

"Oh, Alo," she cried. "I missed you. And something's changed."

He laughed and set her down. "I didn't know things have changed, but I suddenly felt strong enough to do that. Well, well, well, that is wonderful."

"It is so wonderful. Welcome back, my husband."

"It's so good to be back. We've only been gone a few days, but it feels like a very long time."

She laid her head on his chest and reveled in the feeling of his renewed strength, both physical and spiritual. They stood together as others passed them.

"Welcome, welcome," Shelley said as she greeted each man, one by one. "Master Chen, so nice to see you again. Ooh, Mr. Musani, I just love your smile. Welcome back. Mr. Vasilyev, Mr. Alvarez, so good to see you again. Come in, come in, make

yourselves at home. Is everyone hungry? We have a huge breakfast waiting for you. Mr. Johansen, hello!"

Henrik smiled at his gracious hostess. "Hello, Mrs Kino, it feels like we've been gone for weeks instead of days, and seeing you here greeting us, well, it's just so nice to see your kind smile again."

"Aww, thank you. It does feel like you've been gone a very long time."

Henrik turned to the other woman standing a few feet away. "Oh, and Ms. Anna Wallace, it's very nice to see your sweet smile again."

Shelley grinned, watching as Anna actually blushed.

Anna smiled. "Oh, well, thank you, Henrik." She gestured inside. "Please, come in. All of you must be tired."

"Ach, maybe a wee bit," Billy exclaimed as he and his great grandson Cam, and Jeffy and Eli came up the steps.

Shelley immediately took her grandchild in her arms. "Oh my, I sure did miss you, Eli, give me some kisses," she purred as she nibbled his cheek.

"Hey Mom," Jeffy said. "Sorry, but I really need to go nurse him."

"Of course, baby girl. Here ya go. You look tired."

"I am."

"We'll catch up later. Go nurse and maybe take a quick morning nap."

"That's a great idea," Cam said quickly, his eyebrows raised, because he'd just told Jeffy the same thing.

Hazel stood waiting patiently for Ces to finally start up the steps. She hurried to him and took his bag from him. He shook his head, took it back, set it down, took Hazel in his arms and kissed her.

She smiled warmly at him. "I missed you, Ces."

"And I you," he said softly.

"What would you say to you and I also taking a quick morning nap after breakfast?" Hazel asked.

"I would say that sounds like an excellent idea," Ces replied with a twinkle in his eye.

Shelley smiled at the handsome new face that approached. "Hello, you must be Thomas!"

Thomas nodded. "And you must be Grandmaster Kino's delightful wife Shelley, whom he and everyone else just cannot say enough nice things about."

Shelley giggled. "Oh, I bet." She held out her hand to Thomas. "It's so nice to meet you. I've already heard so much about you and about your fine grandson who is in love with our Lily."

Thomas nodded as he squeezed Shelley's hand. "He is a fine young man and she is an absolute angel."

"We've always thought of her that way. Well, please come in and head straight back to the kitchen and make yourself at home. Then after breakfast we'll get you all settled in a room. I'll be right in after I greet my husband."

"Thank you and take your time."

"Oookaaay," Shelley sang sweetly to her little ones after Thomas went inside. "The coast is clear, my babies, you may go!"

The children all screamed with joy and ran down the steps toward their father. Eric dropped the three bags he'd been carrying by his sides and knelt down on the walkway with his arms held out. The children bowled him over, laughing and shrieking with joy. He wrestled with them for a minute or two and finally they all sat cuddled together on the walk.

Eric rose first and started pulling each one up to stand. "Oh, my boys and my girl, I missed you so very much."

"We missed you too, Daddy," Angelina said first.

The others all agreed, hopping up and down and reaching for him. He took time to hug each one and kiss their cheeks. He looked into their eager brown eyes and his heart was filled to overflowing, and feeling immensely grateful for these beautiful spirits who'd come into the world in a very strange way.

"Well now," he began, as he glanced at the top of the stairs. "Were you good for you mother while I was gone?"

"I was," Nate said quickly.

"Me too, me too," the rest said.

"Uh uh, not Manny," Nate said.

Eric looked down at Manny, who lowered his eyes.

"Manny was good too," Angelina said. "He just cwied, dats all."

Manny's eyes filled with tears as he looked up at his father.

Eric knelt down in front of the boy. "Crying is okay, as long as you're not throwing a fit. Why were you crying, son?"

He sniffed. "Cuz I wanted you. I missted you."

Eric took his face in his large hands. "And I missed you too, my boy. I missed you so very much. But ya know what?"

"Wut?"

"Missing you so much just makes me so thankful that I'm here with you now. Are you thankful that I'm home now?"

"Yes suurr."

"Ya see? It works! Sometimes going through hard times, like you missing me so much, makes the good times even better!"

Manny smiled.

Eric liFted the boy up in his arms. "Who's hungry?"

"We are, cuz we had to wait fo you to come home befo we could eat," Noah said. "So now we can eat!"

"Yes we can. All of you run up and get in your seats at the table and let me have a minute to greet your mom and give her a hug too, because I missed her too."

"Is you gonna kiss her too?" Angelina asked.

"Oh, you better believe it! She's my girl, my wife, and boy did I miss her!"

Shelley smiled at his words. The children all ran up the stairs, past her and hurried to get into their booster seats at the dining room table.

Shelley sighed as Eric gathered up the three bags and headed up the steps toward her. She marveled at the power that always accompanied her husband's presence, a calm, almost electrical hum that emanated from him. She never got tired of it. It never diminished. She looked into his eyes as he came to stand in front of her and set the bags down again.

"Good morning, my Shelley girl," he said softly.

"Oh, it really is," she whispered.

He moved forward and cupped her face in his hands. "I missed you."

"I missed you, Eric."

He leaned forward and kissed her softly at first, and then deeply.

When he pulled away he smiled. "If we didn't have a house full of guests I'd leave the kids with Melody and take you upstairs."

Shelley's eyes danced. "I appreciate the sentiment. Melody is off today so that she could go give Logan a proper welcome home."

Eric nodded. "Thoughtful as always. Therefore, we will be patient. But tonight love, tonight I have so much to tell you, and so much love to show you."

"Oh," Shelley said with a giggle. "You just made my heart skip a beat. I mean, literally, my heart skipped at your words."

Eric chuckled. "Good to know I still have it."

✝✝✝

At the same time, Ricky and Gabe were being greeted by Bree and Taylor and Amari and Brittney. Ricky made pretty much the same promise to Bree as Eric made to Shelley. Gabe and Taylor, however, headed down to the beach to find some immediate alone time.

At the Davis home, Jeff was warmly greeted by Daniel, Jeremy, Zoe and Brook. He then snuggled with baby Scarlett and kissed his wife, Mickey, and another promise was made.

Jason Lee was lovingly greeted by Angel. Kimmie and Jensen and baby Jay had stayed to greet Jason and then Jensen had to work, and Kimmie and Jay headed to their home. Justin Lee was also greeted warmly by his wife, and there was nothing keeping them from immediately renewing their love.

Joey arrived home to much celebration and cheers from Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger. Then he turned to Breez and kissed her warmly and made promises to tell her everything after dinner, and then show her how much he missed her.

Mark arrived home with JoJo and Logan, who were all greeted warmly and lovingly by Bella, Emily, Raylynn and Melody. There was enough kissing going on that Emily was feeling a little left out, so they all turned on her and kissed and tickled until she'd had her fill.

Young Eric arrived at Easton Stadium at UCLA shortly after Jordan had begun her shuttle practice. He sat in the stands and watched. Over an hour later, as practice was ending, he stood and headed down to the field as she trotted over.

As she got closer, she didn't slow down and grinning, he held out his arms and waited for the embrace. She dashed into his arms. He lifted her and spun her around.

She wrapped her long legs around his waist and he kissed her fervently, passionately, causing a great longing to rise up between the two of them. He finally set her on her feet and they looked into each other's eyes and laughed and then hugged again.

"Oh man, I missed you, Two-three."

"I can't even tell you how much I missed you, Three. I have felt lost without you. Lost and so afraid."

Young Eric nodded his head. "With good reason. But let's change that to being grateful. Agent Kim saved so many lives yesterday. The girl, Megan, and yours, and mine, and those of our future children."

"I thanked God all night for him and for what he did," Jordan said.

"Me too. And for everything that put him where he was, for his instincts, for him coming to America, for him even being born," Eric said with a laugh.

"It was all God," Jordan said. "He made a way."

"Yes He did. He answered my prayers of keeping you safe while I was gone."

Jordan looked up into the eyes of the guy who would be her husband. "Oh, Three, I'm so grateful and I love you so much."

"Ditto, baby girl," he murmured. "And now, we have something really important to talk about."

"What?" she asked, afraid of what he would say.

"We gotta talk about your stride as you come out of the turns."

Jordan giggled. "Agent Kim told me to accelerate faster, but, it's like I'm not sure when to start."

"You start the moment you touch the inside corner of the base."

"That's what I'm trying to do, but it's like, my mind is slow."

"Well, it'll come with practice. Let's do another private practice at the high school. But if your mind is slow, then start thinking about it before your foot touches the base."

She frowned. "I've been playing softball forever. I know this stuff. Why does it feel so strange?"

"This is a new level you're being pushed to. It's a good thing. You'll get it."

They both turned to see Agent Kim approaching.

"Agent Kim!" Jordan said. "I didn't expect to see you today."

"Well, I was told that young Eric Kino would be here with you, but I wanted to check and be sure all is well."

Eric nodded and took a step back and bowed to Agent Kim. The agent returned the honor and then offered his hand.

"Agent Kim, I can't tell you how grateful I am."

Joon Kim shrugged. "Just doing my job. No thanks necessary."

"Thanks is absolutely necessary. We all knew this Mason guy was a nuisance, but none of us would've figured he was some serial killer. I'm so grateful that you figured it out."

Kim shook his head. "It was all God. He whispered to me that this guy is not right. He was not your average stalker. There was a darkness about him, and God showed me, so I investigated."

"Still, thank you for being so in tune with the spirit. God placed you here for a reason and I'm so very grateful, to Him and to you."

Joon smiled and nodded. "Well, we need our girl strong and healthy because she is gonna tear it up on the softball field this season."

Young Eric nodded. "Yeah she is. I can't wait to see it."

"You guys hush, or you'll get in my head."

Young Eric nodded. "If you feel like what others say about you will get in your head and mess you up, you need a session with Granddad. Remember when I was training for the challenge? I had to focus only on the task at hand. No 'what ifs,' no 'how will this turn out'. Clear your mind and know that your body will perform what it has been trained to do. Know it."

Jordan nodded and sighed. "I'll try."

"There is no 'try'," both young Eric and Joon Kim began at the same time.

Jordan laughed. "There is only 'do'. Got it."

"Well," Joon began. "I'll leave her in your capable hands, *Master* Kino."

Eric drew a breath at the show of respect the older, more experienced man was showing him. He didn't argue with him. He nodded and bowed. Joon returned the honor, shook hands and took his leave.

Jordan watched her guy. "Three, did that make you uncomfortable?"

He sighed and smiled. "Maybe a little. He's older, he's a trained Ameritech Agent. An expert. I'm just me. Still, I'm honored that he was giving me his honor because I am fourth dan and he is second dan. He was probably also boosting my confidence in being able to protect you, which means he is very insightful."

Jordan nodded. "I like that. What I really like is... oh, well, never mind."

Young Eric smiled. "Never mind? Uh, no, you can't just stop. What were you gonna say?"

She sighed. "Okay, well, I mean, I was gonna say, I really like the way you guys aren't jealous of each other."

Young Eric's eyes narrowed. "Jealous?"

"Yeah, like, he honors you, though you are younger. You honor him though you are a higher belt. I really like that. Like, the way you and JoJo and Logan are always giving praise to Gabe, though he's so much younger. You don't act like you're jealous at all."

Young Eric chuckled. "Oh, I'm jealous of Gabe. In a good sort of way. I want to be as close to God as he is. But I think what you're talking about is letting go of the ego. If we get rid of the ego, which is all about us, then we have room to be honest about others doing praiseworthy things. We can not only honestly see the goodness in others, but we can love them and only want the best for them and then we can take their example and integrate it into our own lives. Like brothers, I mean, like, should Logan be jealous of JoJo's football skills? No. Should JoJo be jealous of Logan's musical skills? No. There is no ego there. They both genuinely love each other and want only the best for each other. No ego."

Jordan took young Eric's hand. "Oh, Three, you say such deep things, such

amazing things. I love your wisdom. I am so very blessed to have you in my life."

He pulled her close and cupped her face in his hands. "Jordan Brooks, soon to be Jordan Kino, I too feel so very blessed to have you. You and me, babe, we are supposed to be together. God brought us together and I will do my best to honor His path for us by being the best man I can be."

"Oh, Eric, I don't deserve to be this happy."

"This happy? This ain't nothin' yet. There is so much happiness waiting for us. So much. Still, there's gonna be hard times too. But whatever we face, we'll do it together and we'll do it with faith and prayer and cling tightly to each other and to the Word of God. I will protect you and take care of you and your whole family. I will guard you and..."

"And guide me, Three. I want you to guide me. Teach me. Read the Bible with me. Discuss things with me."

"I'll do my best, and I want you to teach me too."

"What could I possibly teach you?"

He frowned. "Don't downgrade yourself. You just don't understand yet how wise you are, how strong you are. Teach me about love, Jordan. Teach me about loving you. For example, tell me what you're feeling right now."

Jordan giggled.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"When you asked the question, the first answer that came to my mind was not something very deep."

He smiled. "What was it?"

"I'm feeling— hungry."

He laughed. "That's awesome. Good. Me too, let's go eat."

"I wanna go back to the apartment and get cleaned up first."

He nodded. "Let's go grab your stuff."

✝✝✝

Philippians 2:1-4

"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with
Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit,
if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being
like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.
Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value
others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests
but each of you to the interests of the others."

Chapter Thirty-Three

February 1st, 10:30 PM Saturday Night
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Eric Kino rolled onto his back, pulled his wife up to lay on his shoulder and pulled the sheet over them both. They lay silently a few minutes, simply basking in the warmth of each other's love.

Shelley sighed in contentment and slowly rubbed her hand over the scar on her husband's chest. "Eric?" she finally whispered.

"Yes?" he answered.

"I..."

When she didn't go on, he lifted his head and peered over at her. "You what?"

She sighed again. "I don't know. I just feel like my heart is so full. There's a heaviness, like, I want to express it."

His mind began to work, trying to figure out what was going on in her head. It had always been an adventure with Shelley, trying to figure out what was going on inside her beautiful head. "Tell me, the first thing that comes to your mind."

"Well— I love you. That's the first thing that comes to mind."

"That's beautiful, my Shelley girl. I love you too."

"It's just that it feels like too much," Shelley whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Like, just saying 'I love you' is not enough. There's so much more in my mind and my heart."

"Okay then, I think we need to get it all out. Um, so, why do you love me?" he said with a sly smile.

She gave a soft laugh. "Because you're you, I guess. I mean, when I first met you, Eric, you were like this bigger than life famous martial arts master. You were totally hot."

Eric chuckled. "So were you."

Shelley shook her head. "No, I was a thirty something mother of three who couldn't even run two miles."

"And just look at you now," Eric said, not bothering to argue with the truth, but then added, "still, you were totally hot, even given your running inabilities."

"But you, Eric, you were wise, and so spiritual, and so strong in your faith and I was totally enamored of you. Totally infatuated. Totally awed and also inspired. There was no way I *couldn't* fall in love with you."

"Well babe, that is nice to hear, but there were things about me that you didn't see. I was lonely. I was a little confused about my path in life. And with you, I was totally thinking about sensual things and having to fight myself into submission."

"Which only shows your strength," Shelley put in quickly.

"It was a struggle," he admitted. "And when James attacked you, I fought a very hard battle with the need for vengeance. I had a lot of repenting to do."

"Don't you see, Eric? Just you admitting that, shows how strong you are. I'm so grateful for you. I'm so thankful God brought us together and I'm so glad that I met you under the circumstances I met you, or I might not have married you."

He turned on his side to face her, kissed her softly, pulled back and peered into her eyes. "What do you mean?"

She smiled. "Well, I was a rebellious soul. I didn't want to want you. I didn't want to need you. I sure didn't want to submit to you. But I did want to get strong and become a martial artist, so I had to submit. I had to obey. I mean, even your title at the time, Master Kino, kind of made me cringe."

He chuckled. "Really? I never knew that. I never demanded you call me *'Master'* did I?"

"No. Not really. But you did require me to be absolutely obedient to you. You called it respect."

He smiled. "Uh, yeah, because my love, disobedience shows a lack of respect. I was your teacher. If you don't respect me, then I can't teach you. If you respect your teacher and his ability to teach you, then you will be obedient."

Shelley nodded. "I agree. And that's what I'm getting to. It's a really good thing you were my teacher first, and then my love after the fact. I had to quell my rebellious nature and be obedient so that I could learn what I wanted to learn."

"Well then, I guess the Lord knew just what He was doing," Eric said. "He knew just how to get around your ego, and I say ego, because that's what it was. Your ego, our egos, are fearful. In the guise of protecting ourselves, they try to keep us from moving forward into new territory, frightening, out of the normal territory. They don't want anyone to be smarter than us, to be better than us, to be stronger than us. Remember, that was one of the things you used to say. You complained that you always have to submit to someone bigger and stronger."

Shelley smiled. "Yep, and you told me that was true. Always."

He smiled and kissed her again. "Always. Think about it, Shelley girl, we all have to learn this. God is omnipotent, meaning all powerful. He is omniscient, meaning all knowing. We *all* must learn to submit. But He does not gloat, instead He loves. Look at an earthly parent. We are stronger and know more than our infant children, the children we created, but we don't gloat about that, do we? Instead, we strive to make them as strong as possible and as wise as possible. Well, I mean, that's what *good* parents do, and what our heavenly parent does. But to have our children learn, they must be obedient to us, therefore, we must teach them respect, and we must teach them to submit."

Shelley nodded. "Yeah, and you've done a great job with our new babies, teaching them to respect, and obey, and doing it with so much love. I didn't submit to my parents, not that they really tried to teach me anything. I mean, I guess they did, because they were very mad at me for getting pregnant with Bree. But, I mean, like you said, I didn't

really have respect for them. They argued and fought all the time. My brothers were allowed to smack me around. I don't remember any wise words or teachings coming from my parents. I don't remember feeling loved. I was rebellious. And then I got pregnant and married Robert and he demanded submission and I guess I gave it to him. I totally submitted."

"But it wasn't out of respect," Eric said softly. "It was out of fear. He controlled you. He needed a woman he could control. That's why he went after a little girl of fifteen years when he was in college. He needed a malleable soul and that was you, a young, beautiful girl, whose parents were— detached."

Shelley nodded. "So maybe, me being under Robert's thumb made me even more rebellious."

"Ooh, it definitely did," Eric confirmed with a smile.

Shelley giggled. "And then I broke free and then I met you, and then I had to submit to you as my teacher."

"Yes. Again, the Lord knew just what He was doing."

"Well thank goodness, Eric, because, submitting to you was the best thing that ever happened to me. But you know, it wasn't so hard to do, because I had respect for you as my teacher."

"Exactly."

Shelley lay silently a moment. "But look at other marriages, I mean, other good marriages, like Bree and Ricky, Mark and Bella, or Joey and Breez."

"What do you mean? What about them?"

"Their husbands weren't their teachers, first, so how is it that *they* have such good relationships?"

"It's respect that is required, teacher or not," Eric said quickly. "Mark however, *was* Bella's martial arts teacher. She already had great respect for him. And also, she is simply a meek and loving soul by nature. Breez was strong and rebellious, but she had to depend on Joey to save her sister, and he was extremely qualified to do so, and so she had great respect for him. Remember, obedience comes from respect. Now Bree, she's a bit different. Ricky was not her teacher, but she did have great respect for him because she knew what he could do, but, she was also like her mom, rebellious and not so willing to submit to Ricky as her husband. Ricky was extremely strong in his personality and so was Bree. So, it took them a little longer to come together, but Bree herself has said that she totally submits to her husband now and that has brought her so much joy. She says living the role God gave women, has brought her more joy than winning any Oscar or being a boss babe."

"Yes," Shelley said. "She told me that. And it helps to submit to your husband when he is so kind and gentle and loving and caring, like all the men in our family. And all of those men had a great role model. You. Oh, Eric, I'm just so grateful that I have you. I mean, not all men are so good as the ones in our family. I kinda feel sorry for women who don't have husbands that they can respect and admire."

"Then they shouldn't have married them," Eric said. "Why would you marry someone you don't respect?" He knew the answer but waited for his wife to give it to

him.

"Umm, chemistry, I guess," Shelley said. "Or not knowing what to even look for in a spouse. Or not knowing the real person until later, or like, in my circumstance, I didn't know I needed to have respect for a husband. I was...hmm, well, I don't know what I was thinking. I was..."

"*You* were manipulated by an older, more experienced male. Your marriage was not sanctified. God did not bring you and Robert together as eternal mates. However, your marriage brought you three of the most wonderful souls this world has ever known, so you can't regret it. They were meant to be. Everything we've been through has brought us to this point of the amazing joy we now feel."

"Yes, and I'm just so grateful. My heart is so full. I don't even know how I can love someone this deeply, but as I said, I feel a little guilty or sorry for the other women who don't know this bliss."

Eric nodded. "And I feel sorry for men who don't have wives who are kind and respectful and sweet and loving and wise and in service, like the women in our family, like you, my Shelley girl, because you have my whole heart." He leaned forward and kissed her again, this time slowly and thoroughly.

"Your *whole* heart?" Shelley asked.

"Yes, of course," he said casually.

"But..." she began but stopped, because it was a deep subject, one that would probably require time to discuss.

"But what?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

She sighed.

"Tell me baby, please, share your thoughts with me."

"I mean, well, okay, so, I have a question, about later."

"About later?"

"Yes, I mean, in heaven, or in God's kingdom, I guess on the New Earth is what I'm really talking about."

"What's the question?"

Shelley drew a deep breath. "I know that we will be with our loved ones, our families, and all our tears will be dried, like tears of sorrow from those whom we have lost, those who passed away."

"Correct. All tears, which I think includes any reasons for the tears."

Shelley nodded. "And so, there will be families in God's Kingdom, right?

"Yes. As I shared with you, God has shown me that."

"Okay, and families include our spouses and our children and our parents and siblings, etcetera, right?"

"Right, well, all those who believe in and go through the door, meaning Jesus, because He is the door."

"Okay, and Ann, she believed in Jesus. She was saved, right?"

"Ahh, yes, right, I see where you're going."

Shelley nodded. "So, will you have two wives?"

"It's a good question, honey. I don't give it much thought or worry because when

I was under the tree speaking with Jesus, He told me some things, He gave me some reassurances, but He also said that there is much we don't know yet, much we don't understand, and that some things, some information, we are not given yet because we won't comprehend it. He said some things are not covered in the Bible, completely, but the Bible only alludes to how things will be and people, even Bible scholars, have misconstrued what it means, or made false assumptions. In Matthew, Mark and Luke it pretty much says the same thing in all three, that 'At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.'"

Shelley frowned. "Right. So, that sounds like we *won't* be together?"

Eric smiled. "Hmm, there's so much to unpack here. Let me see, well, first, the Bible alludes to the eternal nature of families, right? It certainly tells of the eternal nature of our beings, right? We will have eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord, right?"

"Yes," Shelley said softly. "And maybe I misunderstood, but I thought that you told me that one of the things Jesus taught you under that tree was that marriage is a divine institution, designed to last."

Eric nodded. "Yes, He taught me that because I asked Him about you. But let me go back further. A long time ago, I prayed and asked about divorce, because, well, because I was glad that you and your first husband had gotten divorced. I didn't want to be on the wrong side of God's laws, so I took my questions and fears to the Lord and received an answer that made so much sense."

"What answer did you get?" Shelley asked. "I mean, you've already told me that mine and Robert's marriage was not sanctioned by God."

"Right. You see, babe, the scripture says 'what God has joined together, let no man put asunder.' But the Lord taught me that there are many marriages that He did not bring together. Many. Maybe even most. People were simply attracted to each other, but there was no base. It was just chemistry. Many, like you, got pregnant and that's why they married. Many married for money or fame, or without very much thought at all, and most definitely without prayer and without God's approval. And many, way back a long time ago, many married because it was arranged by their families.

"But in the Bible, when Jesus was asked about divorce, He said, 'It was not this way from the beginning,' meaning, marriage's original, sacred intent, was a lifelong covenant before God. He allowed divorce because of hardness of hearts, and sin bringing the wrong people together."

Shelley nodded. "Okay, yes, but some people really loved their spouse, and then the spouse died, and they really loved their second spouse."

Eric smiled. "I hear ya, babe. Let me finish. Sometimes the Lord brings two people together because their DNA is important. Sometimes a certain DNA is needed to carry the light of a certain individual, a certain lineage. For example, the story of Ruth. Her first husband died and then she married Boaz. This was planned. It was part of the lineage of Jesus. This was important. So then, some marriages were made by God for a certain reason. So, certain human marriages were only for a short season. And some, my sweet Shelley girl, were for eternity. It might be hard to comprehend, but that's

because we don't know what we don't know."

"So, you are saying that we might still be husband and wife when we are in God's kingdom?"

"Yes, but not *all* earthly marriages. However, you and I Shelley, the Lord brought us together. He gave me dreams. He sent me to you. We were meant to be together. Ann and I were also meant to be together— for a time. But under the tree, Jesus told me that Ann's calling is different. He actually showed me that a long time ago, but I didn't comprehend completely. Ann has a different path. He even showed me that Ann has a different mate who waited for her while she fulfilled her mission here on Earth. And here's something interesting; not all eternal mates are called to be with one another during the human experience as marriage partners. Your soul mate may not have ever known you during your earthly life. You may have lived centuries apart. Think of it.

Shelley nodded. "So, Ann's marriage, or her eternal mate, she wasn't traditionally married, or given in marriage like the way it works on this earth? But there will be unions? Holy unions? Which sounds like a real soul mate."

"Correct."

"Okay, well, that's interesting," Shelley said softly, feeling relieved. "And so, how do *you* feel about that?"

Eric smiled. "I feel grateful. Grateful to have you now and to have loved Ann for a time. And so grateful that she too has her mate, because I wouldn't want Ann to be lonely or grieving the loss of *our* relationship."

Shelley shook her head. "No, I wouldn't want her to do that either. I'm relieved that she has her own eternal mate. But still, back to what we talked about earlier, didn't Jesus also say that there will not be marriages in heaven?"

"Let's break this down bit by bit," Eric said softly, realizing this was very important to his sweet wife. He sat up and leaned his back against the headboard.

Shelley sat up, pulled the sheet around her and sat cross-legged, listening intently to what her husband was teaching.

"When Jesus made that statement about marriage," Eric began. "He was answering a trick question, a question that was asked by the Sadducees, who were a group, a wealthy group, who unlike the Pharisees, didn't believe in an afterlife or in the resurrection. They were trying to get Jesus to see how ridiculous it was to believe in the resurrection or an afterlife."

Eric turned and picked up the Bible lying on his nightstand. He opened it to Matthew 22:30 and read, "For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven." He looked up and smiled at her. "It says essentially the same thing in Mark and Luke. It sounds like He's saying there will not be marriages, no husbands and wives in the Kingdom, but that's not exactly what He said. It's more about what He didn't say, than what He did say. He said they, the Sadducees, didn't know the scriptures and didn't know or understand the power of God. That part is pretty clear.

"It also says, we will not marry or be given in marriage. This is the part that is really unclear. Jesus, in essence was saying that marriages in heaven will either not be,

or will not be like they are here on earth. So then, how will they be? Under the tree, Jesus showed me many things. He showed me, as you already stated, that families will be together. He showed me that there will be children in His Kingdom on the New Earth. He told me that marriage in heaven is not like we have participated in on Earth. We will not haphazardly find someone, think they'd be fun to be with and then marry them, and our earthly parents will not give us away in marriage. That is exactly what Jesus said in the Bible.

"So, then what?" Shelley asked.

Eric nodded patiently. "So, like God did for Ann, God has a plan for each of His children. Here on earth, we say often that God has a plan for our lives. But it's not just for our earthly lives. The plan doesn't end when we enter His Kingdom. So then, just like God created Eve specifically for Adam, the Father Himself has created a mate for us. Now, He also showed me that some do NOT have that same privilege, yet. Some are not to that level of worthiness. They have some work to do. There is a hierarchy. Only some will be able to procreate. He didn't explain further, or give me more information, but did merely remind me that He brought you and I together and we have been given five new souls to love and teach.

Shelley smiled. "So then, He was in essence telling you that you and I WILL be together as husband and wife, I mean, I guess as *chosen mates*, right?"

"It does seem that way, but many times He doesn't tell us the whole situation because we are not yet ready to comprehend or handle the situation. He told me that love in heaven and on the New Earth, is much different. It's much deeper. More profound. Purer. Holier. Powerful. More beautiful than we can imagine."

Shelley frowned again. "Okay, but then, what about the angels? What did Jesus mean that we will be like the angels?"

Eric smiled and reached out and cupped his wife's face. "Oh, Shelley, I do love you. You must get all the meat off the bone, huh?"

She giggled.

He smiled and nodded. "First, Jesus showed me that heaven and His Kingdom on the New Earth are two different places and will have different qualities. I just want you to keep that in mind. Now, about the angels. Many don't realize this, but us humans and angels are not really that different. We only have different current callings or missions. Many people think of angels as a completely different species, but that's not true. We are all God's children. Angels, like us, serve God. Many times their tasks include being God's messengers. If you think about it, that is the same for us. Now, when Jesus made the statement that we will be like the angels, a statement that confuses so many people, it was to end the ridiculous question of the Sadducees. But Jesus wasn't lying. He didn't say that angels do not marry. Most people believe Jesus was saying exactly that angels do not marry, but He didn't say that. He said we will be like the angels. That's because we *are* like the angels. They may not marry in how we marry here on the earth, but that doesn't mean they don't or can't have mates. Angels and humans are the same in many ways, in more ways than we as humans might understand. And angels are not inferior or superior to humans. Just different callings.

"Many believe that Jesus said that angels have no gender. That is not true. That is not what He said. That is an assumption. A false assumption. Angels have different callings and there are different kinds. There are different reasons that angels were created. People love to take a thing they've learned and apply it as a blanket over everything."

"What do you mean?" Shelley asked.

Eric thought. "Okay, for example, the commandment that says 'thou shall not kill.' So, the armies that God commanded when they were taking back the promised land, was God commanding His armies to sin? Of course not. We all have reasoned that God was talking about committing murder and not what one must do to preserve a people or a nation or a family or— a loved one," Eric ended pointedly, because *he* had killed to save Shelley.

"Some believe that angels are only spirit bodies and have no physical bodies. Again, a blanket statement because people are not humble enough to accept that they don't know everything, which is much like the Pharisees and Sadducees and many mockers and scoffers of all ages. Some angels do have bodies. Some don't. There are levels upon levels of beings in God's Kingdom. We, as humans, cannot comprehend the vastness nor the eternal nature of God's Kingdom. So, when Jesus said, 'we will be like the angels', it doesn't mean we will not have a mate or that we will be genderless. Jesus explained many things to me, as He so often does, by asking me a series of questions."

Shelley nodded. "Go ahead, I'm listening."

The intent look in her eyes, the serious expression on her face when she was in learning mode, made Eric's heart swell. He nodded and smiled. "He asked me, 'what, Eric, would you say are some of the most heavenly, divine experiences here on earth that you experience— as a human."

Eric chuckled. "When He asked me that question I immediately started to say that interacting with Him, or when my angel visited me back when I was ten, or thousands of other times His Spirit filled me with so much love and understanding, but before I could get the words out He stopped me. He held up his hand and said with his beautiful smile, 'I mean other than the times you and I have communed. I am speaking only of earthly pleasures.'

"And so, I thought only a moment. First, the wonderful feeling of new love. Attraction and falling in love with first Ann and then with you. New love is amazing. It's what makes the world go 'round. Sharing your body and soul with someone, an extreme earthly pleasure. The first time making love to my wife after a marriage sanctified by God, an extreme pleasure. Waiting for a child to be born, an extreme pleasure. The amazing, 'take my breath away' feeling when gazing on my newly born child. The love that bloomed whenever my wife or my children did something, anything. Smiled. Kissed me. Hugged me. Accomplished anything, be it big or something as small as taking a first step. I remember feeling embarrassed, when I told Jesus that the first time I made love to you, and every single time thereafter was a huge extreme pleasure, along with sharing my heart and soul with you and worshiping God with you, and praying with you."

Shelley smiled sweetly at the thoughts and the memories.

Eric reached out and squeezed her hand. “I also spoke about other physical, earthly pleasures, like delicious foods, or flowers, or beautiful music, choirs singing, praising God together in church with hundreds or thousands of others. My children’s eyes on Christmas morning. My relief when Ricky was found and when Bree told me she’d found Jeffy, and when we ourselves found Jeffy with Cam in the woods. When young Eric was found. Even small things, like whenever Gabe and I exchange bows. When Taylor calls me Granddaddy. Seeing JoJo that first time. Watching Logan heal. There have been so many pleasures, I could go on for days. Jesus smiled at me with such love. And then He asked me a slew of questions, because, as I’ve said before, it seems He likes to teach me by asking me questions that make me reason things out for myself.”

“Okay, so, what questions did He ask?” Shelley prodded.

“He said, ‘So tell me Eric, why would, in a place called ‘heaven’, which figuratively, is a place of peace, joy, bliss, and supreme happiness, why would He take away the most joyful, peaceful, blissful things that you experience here on earth? He asked me why would someone be gender-less in heaven? Why would God create male and female if gender didn't matter in His Kingdom? Why would angels be gender-less if again, God created us as males and females? Why would God create Eve for Adam and not do that for any other human being? Why, then, if God has designated mates for us, would He not have us with our mates in heaven as eternal mates? Why would God condemn homosexuality and other deviant lifestyles here on earth, if gender doesn’t matter? Why, if families are so important, would we not be with our families eternally? Why, if creating families here on earth is so wonderful, why would He take that away from us in His Kingdom. Actually, He gave me an answer to that one which I’ll tell you about in a minute,” Eric said quickly and then went on.

Why would God do away with beautiful music and delicious foods, wonderful performances, extraordinary skills and feats, why would He take away our need to create, our arts, our skills? When He asked *that*, it prodded me to ask Him, ‘so, then will there be sports in heaven? And he told me there will be amazing sports and competitions, done with honor, and in good nature, things that are praiseworthy. There will be mighty warriors, extremely skilled warriors.”

Eric stopped and smiled. “Jesus smiled when He said that and then said, ‘and yes, Eric, you are one of them.’ It was a high honor and I was very emotional.”

Shelley wiped tears from her own eyes. “That is beautiful Eric. I didn’t realize there was so much you hadn’t shared with me.”

“Well, there is still much to share, my love, but I have to take it slow and not inundate you with more than I understand myself.”

Shelley nodded. “Well I don’t want you to stop. Go on.”

“We do have to get some sleep tonight, babe.”

“Okay, but just tell me the thing you said you were gonna address. The one Jesus gave you an answer about why would He take away families.”

Eric nodded. “Yes, that one. The question was ‘why would He take away allowing us to create families’. The funny thing is, to most of those questions He asked me, the

answer was pretty much, 'He wouldn't.' But He had a different answer to that particular question. He said there WILL be those who have their mates and who will be able to procreate and make families. But this is a worthiness matter. Being allowed to procreate and create a family in His Kingdom is a worthiness blessing. Many are not ready for that challenge. In Revelation 22 it says He will repay each one for what he has done.

"Many people are not looking past getting into heaven. They just wanna make it there. They don't think about what comes next. They take advantage of God's grace, of the gift that Jesus so willingly gave us. The gift itself was free. But this is a good illustration of why we should not just say' OK I believe in Jesus', just to get into the Kingdom, but then don't do anything else. They don't allow the Holy Spirit to fill them and change their actions and convict them to live holy. The gift is free. Jesus' blood was sufficient, but there is more.

"There is a hierarchy. Jesus also said, 'If you love me, keep my commandments.' What you will and won't be able to accomplish in God's Kingdom is a good reason to live as holy and as nobly as possible, because only those who understand and have demonstrated how we are meant to live will be the ones who will be privileged to procreate. Now, there is nothing in the Bible about this characteristic of God's Kingdom. But as He's told me many times, we don't know what we don't know. As a matter of fact, we know very little. Just like the Pharisees who were such educated Torah scholars, so our Bible scholars today will be too blinded by their supposed knowledge to realize that many things they assumed are not as they supposed. Remember many things were sealed up."

Shelley sighed. "So, what do we do?"

"We shine our light, babe. We be an example. We don't shy away from telling the truth. Jesus is doing a new thing and many will not be able to see it because they cannot see past what they think they know. But it's gonna be okay. His grace is sufficient. From there onward, vindication *will* happen. We certainly do NOT argue with other Christians about what Jesus has shown me. He specifically asked us not to do that. He said Christians arguing with and calling out other believers does no good to His church, but only harms it. The things they argue about don't matter right now, and we all will know the whole real truth eventually."

Shelley yawned. "I want to know more."

Eric chuckled. "I think you need to sleep."

"Please, just do a sum-up then. I mean, like, about the Kingdom of God."

Eric sighed and finally nodded. Because no matter how tired he was, his wife, his mate, his eternal companion was asking for knowledge and how could he say no to that? "Okay, but let's lay down and get comfortable."

They scooted down into the bed and snuggled up close, face to face. Eric smiled at his Shelley-girl. Oh how he loved her.

Shelley smiled at Eric, blinking up at him, waiting for him to sum up all that they'd just talked about.

"Okay," Eric said softly. "So, there are some people who have reasoned that we won't need a mate or a companion once we are in the Kingdom because we will have

God as our eternal companion. Well, in response to that, in the Garden of Eden, Adam walked with God. God *was* his companion, but God himself decided that Adam needed a female companion. God made Eve *for* Adam. He said, 'It is not good for man to be alone.' Eve was never made to be without Adam. And you, my Shelley, were never meant to be without me." He leaned forward and softly kissed her forehead, and then went on.

"There are females in heaven. Obviously there will be a lot more after the rapture. We must remember that almost every creature ever created has a male and female gender and role. Females are good and lovely, and as a man, I have to say that I am extremely grateful for them. Now, just because the bible doesn't mention female *angels* doesn't mean they don't exist. We see angels come in forms that can look human or very non-human, we treat them like a species, but I think they're more of an office of beings, meaning, 'angel' is a job description or a function rather than a distinct biological species. We just don't know enough. We will someday, because here's a little golden nugget that Jesus gave me under the tree. In the Kingdom there will be 'an exquisite unconditional privy to understanding.'" Eric stopped and smiled.

"I love the way He put it, such a beautiful statement; exquisite unconditional privy to understanding. Think about it. He didn't say we will all just suddenly know everything there is to know, but we WILL be privy to it. I imagine it will take some effort on our part. But back to the subject of female angels. The Bible does NOT tell us that there are no female angels. It's an assumption. We only know of a handful of angels who happen to be male. In fact, some we don't even know what their sex is, because what's important is the message, not the messenger."

Eric stopped and smiled. "Oops, I got a little off in a loop. I'm supposed to be summing up. Let's see, sum up. Okay, so again, why in a place called heaven or actually heaven and the New Earth because the new earth is what Jesus was specifically talking to me about, why would He take away the most heavenly things; love, procreation, family, etcetera. He wouldn't. He focused on the genders, male and female, because they are important. Satan knows that. That's why he works so hard on a receptive group of people here on earth who distort what God created with a thousand different genders, or, non-genders. He created male and female in His own image, which means there were males and females in heaven. Satan loves to distort what God created. But he will not win.

"And my love, there are children in heaven. In Isaiah 11: 8 it says, 'The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole and the weaned child shall put his hand to the viper's den.' So, when creation is restored, there are babies and children present and know that will bring you and I much joy. And in Isaiah 60:22 'A little one shall become a thousand and a small one a strong nation.' Life goes on!

"Jesus told me that in His Kingdom on the New Earth, there will be families, with children, there will be obstacles to overcome, not evil, just our own shortcomings. We will be righteous, and we will continue to evolve. We will have perfect bodies, but we will have much growing and evolving and learning to do. Learning and growing in the Kingdom of God will be much easier than it is here on Earth. We will learn much more

quickly and evolve much easier without Satan around to work on us. But Jesus also wanted me to remember that after the thousand year millennial reign, which isn't that long, Satan will be loosed again for a 'short while,' whatever that means. Well, you and I both know that a short while, could be a pretty long time. We will need to learn how to battle evil, or remember how to battle evil, because it IS coming again.

"Again, it is so important to realize that we don't know what we don't know. There is soooo much we don't know. Nothing is as it seems, however, His gift is real and His gift is free and all you have to do is accept it. You don't have to jump through hoops. You are not saved by works. His sacrifice is sufficient. But there is still a reason to do good works, to live holy, and to keep the commandments.

✝✝✝

February 2nd Sunday Morning

Hopewood Chapel Church of Christ, Huntington Beach, California

It had been a strange morning. Jeffy had come down to breakfast with a feeling of impending trouble. The visitors were looking forward to attending church at the Hopewood Chapel and Eric asked his daughter if maybe they should stay home. She said no, they should go, but be ready and maybe head over earlier than usual to get a good seat. As they drove, several of them received phone calls from the family members who were already at the church, warning them to pull into the parking lot and wait for Ameritech agents, because there was trouble. So, Jeffy's premonition was right on, as usual.

The family members that were already at the church included Mark and Bella with little Emily, JoJo and Logan, Joey and Breez with their three children, and also with their houseguests, the Okellos, including Balon and Sanyu. Also already there were Raylynn and Kaylee Quinn, Melody Keith, and Ryder Bell who had swung by the Davis home and picked up Brook and Zoe. Jeff and Mickey Davis, with baby Scarlett, and Daniel and Jeremy were right behind. Also there inside the church, were Ronald Clark and his daughter Donna, and great grandchildren, Carson and Sydney, Pastor Pat, Bristol and Christina Palma and the entire choir and musicians and tech staff. Of the whole group, Ronny, his nephew Patrick, Mark, Joey, Jeff, Logan and JoJo stood outside at the top of the church steps, listening and guarding the church doors.

As the Kino entourage pulled into the parking lot, they could see there was some strange things taking place. The sidewalk in front of the chapel on both sides of the street was crowded. People walking and yelling and holding up signs. There were several police cars parked along the street and cops were blowing whistles and trying to keep people out of the street, ushering them back up onto the sidewalks to allow cars to pass.

Ricky's household pulled into the parking lot right after Eric's convoy. Ricky and Bree, with Amari and Brittney, Gabe and Taylor in Gabe's car, and young Eric and Jordan with Josie and Jamie. Jewell had been invited to attend a different church by her assistant manager of the *Taster's Table*, so she was not with the group. They all stood in the parking lot with Eric and his large group, discussing if they should even try to make their way up to the church.

Eric's answered his phone and put it on speaker and they gathered around.

"Yeah, Joey, so, what's the plan?"

"Good morning sir," Joey said, accompanied with a giant sigh. "So, obviously, we got trouble this morning. I see you guys have just pulled into the parking lot."

"Yes, and I see you at the top of steps."

"Good. Okay, and Cam is with you and is getting his orders any second now, as well as Gabe."

Eric glanced over at both Cam and Gabe who both were on their phones. "Looks like that's happening now," Eric said. "So, Joe, what exactly is goin' on?"

"Well sir, from a human perspective, a group of people have decided to protest against us Christians and have chosen our *Hopewood Chapel* community to carry out their goals. From a spiritual perspective, I imagine you and my sister and the men with you would be able to discern what's going on better than me."

Eric nodded and looked around at the others.

"Ach, ya think maybe Eric, that we may have rustled some feathers from the dark side and they are coming after us?" Billy said.

Lev nodded. "Get too strong and the bad guys will try another avenue."

"Though these are not the same bad guys," Ces put in.

"Right, because the ones we just battled are no longer on the earth," Andrew added. "I believe we have definitely riled the enemy."

Eric nodded. "Correct. Shine a light bright enough and the dark forces will for sure rally to try to put it out." He held the phone close to his mouth. "So, Joey, what do we have?"

"Well sir, it appears it's a protest and it appears the main perpetrators are members of the alphabet community. I see a lot of rainbows and different colored hair, like blue and green. There is a sign that says *Hopewood Chapel* and then the 'Hope' is crossed out and 'Hate' written above it."

"Okay, I get the picture."

"And so the question is..." Joey began, "Do you still want to bring the wife and kids and everyone through this mess and get inside the church?"

Eric nodded because it was a legitimate question. He knew what he wanted to do, but again, he looked around at the others. "Shelley?" he asked.

She drew a deep breath. "I'm not afraid, Eric. And I believe that we cannot allow others to stop us from what we want to do, and especially stop us from assembling at our church, and I'm a little surprised Eric, that you would even ask. We are warriors, are we not?"

Eric smiled and nodded. "We are, but I am also the one responsible for the protection of our family and of this group of people."

"You are our host, Eric," Henrik put in quickly. "However, you are not our protector. God is our protector and I am ready to battle."

Alo and Dani both nodded. "We agree with Henrik," Alo said.

Eric nodded. "So Joey, did you hear all of that?"

"Yes sir, I did. Then there will be ten agents arriving in a few minutes to escort you

all up the walk, up the steps and into the building."

Eric sighed. "I hate to call agents in on their day off."

"We put out a request and they all volunteered. They are assembling down at the school a few miles away and will be arriving in two vans since there is really no place to park."

Eric nodded. "We'll be waiting." He ended the call.

Ricky moved forward. "Young Eric and Jordan will be in charge of Amari. Bree will hold Brittney, since I need my hands free, and I'll walk them in and Gabe will be in charge of Taylor's safety and Cam of course will..."

At that moment both Cam and Gabe turned quickly, as one, and headed toward the entrance to the parking lot. A group of the protesters were starting in.

Both young men held out their hands and shook their heads as they stepped forward together, side by side to stop them.

"You can't stop us," one protester shouted. "This is a public street."

Cam shook his head again and spoke loudly. "The street is public, but this parking lot is private property and you cannot come in here."

"Oh yeah, who's gonna stop us?"

Cam and Gabe stepped forward, their faces masked in fierce scowls.

"Let me just warn you, I am special forces," Cam began, "and I am sworn to protect the people in this parking lot, and I will stop at nothing to make sure they are protected."

Gabe nodded. "Listen, guys, you can protest all you want. But we will not let you on this property."

At that moment a large man pushed his way through the other protesters and took one step off the sidewalk and into the parking lot, shoving Gabe backward.

Cam moved so fast, it was hard to see what he did. He simply swept the leg of the man, twisted his arm and landed him on his stomach with his arm behind his back. "Don't make me have to hurt you, man."

"I'll sue you. I'll press charges."

"I was defending my position," Cam said, "and my friend here. So, this is a warning. You are messing with the wrong people. You *will* get hurt."

A few Huntington Beach officers arrived and ushered the people back away from the parking lot.

Cam quickly explained why he took the man down. The officers knew of Cam and the Kinos, and Ameritech since they'd worked closely with them recently to get rid of some bad apples in their own department. They merely nodded at his explanation and offered to assist getting them into the church.

Cam nodded. "We'd appreciate the help. Can you wait a few minutes, though? We have some backup agents coming that should be pulling up any minute."

"Yes, we'll wait."

They all quieted as they listened to another officer speaking through the siren speaker from the grill of his squad car.

"All protesters, listen up. You have no permit, therefore, you must keep walking. You may not block the sidewalk, you may not walk in the road. You may not impede

the progress of any car or anyone walking on the sidewalk. If you do any of those things, you will be arrested. You may not throw anything, you may not destroy or damage any property, you may not touch, push or spit. If you do, you will be arrested and the victim will prosecute to the full power of the law."

One of the officers that assisted Gabe and Cam spoke into his portable radio. "Hey, Cap, Ameritech agents are being dispatched."

"Yep, we know, and that's what I was about to tell these people."

"There are Ameritech security agents on scene and they are all part of our force and you will obey them as you would Law Enforcement Officers." The car moved slowly down the street repeating everything over and over.

Both Cam and Gabe smiled at that, their eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Wow, I feel powerful," Gabe said.

Cam chuckled. "Don't let it go to your head."

Gabe nodded and quickly moved to another area where people were trying to come into the parking lot. He ushered them out, but they weren't so pleasant, yelling obscenities and shoving their phones in his face.

"I know who you are," one girl with purple hair yelled. "You're Gabe Tanner, aren't you? You're a hypocrite. You talk about love, but you're homophobic."

Gabe's brow furrowed. "What's your definition of homophobic?"

"You hate gay people."

"Wrong. I love all people. I hate sin," Gabe said shortly.

That caused a huge cry and several people rushed at him. Cam, young Eric and Ricky ran to help, but they didn't have to because the cops were there immediately and they took down one girl who hit Gabe with her phone. She was handcuffed and led away.

At that moment, the two black vans arrived. They slowly made their way through the crowd and into the parking lot. Ten strong men dressed in black suits emerged from the van. They headed straight to Cam, because they'd been instructed to take their directions from him.

In only a few minutes both Kino households were organized into women and children in the center surrounded by the men of their households and then flanked by the Ameritech agents.

Anna Wallace walked next to Billy Wallace, her eyes wide with what she was witnessing. "This is crazy," she mumbled to Billy.

He nodded. "Aye, the dark forces will try to stop the light, but don't worry, lass, they will not succeed."

Thomas Sawyer and Henrik Johansen walked right behind them. "Don't worry, Anna, we won't let anything happen to you," Henrik said.

Behind them, Taylor walked along holding Noah in her arms and next to her, Jordan walked with Abe in her arms. Sakchai Chen carried Nate, and Miguel carried Manny. Lev and Andrew walked right behind Miguel. After them, Jeffy had taken Eli from his carrier and was carrying him close against her chest. Eric held the empty carrier for her. Next, Shelley had been holding Angelina but she began to cry for her

Daddy, so Eric took her in his other arm. Next in line, Bree held the hands of both Brittney and Amari, both whose eyes were large with fear. Ricky had assured them that all was well and he was right beside and slightly behind the three of them and wouldn't let anything happen to them. Bringing up the rear, Dani and Alo Quinn walked side by side, and right behind them came Ces and Hazel Iman. The entire group was surrounded by Cam, Gabe, Ricky, young Eric and ten Ameritech agents.

They moved out of the parking lot and people were asked to step aside to allow them to pass or be shoved aside and/or be arrested. The crowd, chanting vulgar things, like "God is a lesbian," or, "We're coming for your children," and even worse, ""5, 6, 7, 8, 'eff' the christofascist state," and a whole lot of, "You hate us but we hate you more." There was the common, "My body my choice," and a lot of, "Love, not hate... that's what makes America great!"

Shelley shook her head in sadness and sorrow, wishing these people would allow her to communicate with them. Maybe with real communication they could begin to see that neither she, nor any of her family have hatred in their hearts. It was strange, because this wasn't just a pride parade, but it was joined with abortion rights activists. They all just didn't understand, Shelley thought. Her family doesn't condone hatred, but they also don't condone sin. And like it or not, homosexuality is a sin, and it absolutely CAN be overcome. And murdering unborn babies is a sin, but you absolutely can be forgiven. There was so much to say. If only she could speak to them.

Just as she had that thought, two women ran at them, charging between the agent who had been walking a little ahead of Shelley on her right, and the agent who was walking a little behind Shelley also on her right. The agent who was slightly behind immediately stepped forward and shoved one of the women back, the larger one, but the other got through and grabbed a large handful of Shelley's hair, jerking her head back.

Instead of trying to pull away from her, Shelley immediately bent her knees to remain stable, grabbed the woman's hand and arm with both of her hands and pressed the woman's hand even closer, firmly against Shelley's head. Then twisting her body down, the woman's arm hyperextended and the woman had to let go or have her wrist broken. The woman cried out.

It all happened within a few seconds. Shelley put the move on the female attacker, Shelley's children all began to scream, Eric dropped Eli's baby carrier, handed Angelina off to Andrew and moved to help regain order. He smiled though, as he realized his wife was still a champ. "Guys," Eric said softly and then pointed at his eyes.

Immediately, young Eric, Jordan, and Taylor handed off the children they'd been carrying, pulled out phones and began videoing.

The second woman that the agent had intercepted wrestled away and came back and that was when they realized it was actually a man.

Having done away with her attacker, Shelley whirled, ready to take on anyone else, but the Huntington Beach police intervened and the crowd was backed up a little, only shaking their fists and snarling ugly remarks at the Kino party.

A couple of the people who'd been leading chants moved closer, their microphones being broadcast off an amplifier that was being rolled around in a wagon. One of them

shoved the mic in front of Shelley and another woman moved slowly forward toward Shelley. “I’m sorry my sister did that, but why, lady? Why do you hate us so much?”

Shelley smiled sadly and shook her head. “I don’t hate you. *We* don’t hate you. I love you. I really do. What makes you think we hate you?”

“You always trying to tell us what we can and can’t do, and how we can act and stuff.”

Shelley smiled. “Do you have children?”

“Yeah, I got two kids.”

Shelley nodded. “Do you allow them to play in the street?”

“Of course not.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “That’s obvious. I don’t want them to get run over by a car.”

“Why?” Shelley persisted.

The girl shook her head and rolled her eyes. “What are you gettin’ at?”

“You don’t want them to get run over because you don’t want them to get hurt, because you love them. So you make a rule that they can’t go out and play in the street, right?”

“Sure.”

“What I’m gettin’ at, is that’s the same reason our Father in heaven, our Creator, that’s why He makes rules for us. Because He knows if we follow His rules we won’t get hurt, at least not badly. Now, we might fall and scrape our knees, but He knows that if we follow His rules then we will live a very happy and joy-filled life, instead of one filled with regret.”

The girl was silent a few moments. She blinked at Shelley as she thought over the words that had been spoken.

Shelley looked into the girl’s eyes. They were beautiful blue eyes with dark lashes. Her hair was long and dark and Shelley suddenly gave into the need to reach up and smooth some of the hair out of the girl’s face.

The girl gasped and drew back.

“Sorry, I wasn’t gonna hit you,” Shelley said quickly.

“What were you doing?”

“Oh, well, I was just gonna smooth some hair out of you face. You have such pretty eyes, it would be a shame to cover them up with your hair.”

The girl gasped again.

“I’m sorry,” Shelley said quickly. “I really didn’t mean any harm.”

The girl shook her head and sniffed. “Why? Why did you do that?”

Shelley’s brows wrinkled in confusion. “I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I just had this sudden feeling that I should brush the hair out of your face. I really didn’t...”

Shelley stopped because the girl’s eyes filled with tears.

The girl sniffed away her tears but stayed silent. The woman holding the microphone spoke into it. “Look what you’ve done now. You made her cry. You are heartless.”

“No,” the girl with blue eyes said quickly and grabbed the mic back. “She didn’t

say anything wrong. She was being kind. It just got to me because— that's what my mother used to say to me all the time. She would brush the hair back from my face and say it's a shame to cover up those pretty eyes, and it got to me. My mom died four years ago. She, took her own life."

"Oh, sweetie," Shelley said softly. "Oh, honey, I know that hurts. I know."

The girl sniffed. "She was into all that stuff, ya know. All that Jesus stuff."

Shelley smiled. "Did you know that Jesus overcame death? We will live again, with Him and with your mom, and all we have to do is accept His gift."

"She doesn't wanna hear all your fairy tale stuff," the woman holding the mic said loudly.

The girl looked up. "Yes I do. I want to hear what she has to say."

Shelley felt the Spirit move over her. "May I have the mic a moment?"

The other woman rolled her eyes and held it out to her.

Shelley took the mic and it was as if the entire street grew quiet. "So, all of you out here protesting, that is your right to express your opinion, but maybe it could help you to protest even better if you had more information from the people you are protesting against. The information might give you even better arguments, or it might heal your hearts, and I know your hearts need healing. I invite every single one of you to come into the church. The people who go to church here will give up their seats for you. Come in. We won't stay with our planned program. We'll address your concerns and we'll sing some songs, because we have an amazing choir made up from the people in this community with a lot of young people and two rising stars, Logan Adams and Mika Burton. One of our pastors who was the USC quarterback will speak to you, and possibly a few movie stars. And the teen duo of Gabe and Taylor are here and may also speak and answer questions. Please come in, we'll do this like family, we'll abide with each other for a bit, and afterward, we'll, um..." She stopped and glanced at her husband, and then went on. "Afterward, we'll eat together." She looked at Eric again.

He nodded at her and immediately pulled out his phone.

Shelley went on. "We'll feed all of you. We'll talk, we'll commune, we'll go away understanding each other better. So, what do you say? Will you join us?"

There were some angry things yelled out, but there were also some calm voices who seemed to be considering the invitation.

Eric watched in awe of his sweet wife. He thought his heart would explode. She was doing it again; making lemonade. He looked over the crowd. The anger seemed to be dissipating. There were maybe three hundred people lining the sidewalks on both sides of the street and on the church front lawn and on Ronny's front lawn. The people who lived in the house next door to Ronny were on their porch watching, probably not happy that people were all over his front lawn.

Up at the top of the church steps Ronny, his nephew Patrick, Mark, Joey, Jeff, Logan and JoJo stood listening. They had been guarding the church doors. Now they were quickly adjusting to what was taking place. This would be an amazing day, hopefully for all the right reasons.

Logan started inside. "Well, I have to go prepare the choir. I think we're gonna

liven things up a bit."

JoJo nodded and smiled and then turned questioning eyes on Reverend Clark and Pastor Pat. "What can I do to help?"

Ronny smiled. "You can go inside and pray and ask the Lord to tell you what you can say to this crowd and do it in love, yet without tickling ears."

"Me?"

"You heard your grandmother, didn't you? Now get to it. The rest of us will go tell the elderly and others who have already arrived what is taking place. I think we might seat them in a safe space near the front and start rounding up chairs. And arrange the downstairs community room too, because we can broadcast the meeting on that monitor too." He looked up at Mark, Joey and Jeff.

The three men nodded. "Yes sir. Let's get to it."

✝✝✝

Psalm 66:16

"Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for my soul."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Pastor Patrick Barnes stood at the podium and smiled at the giant congregation. Every single bench was filled, everyone squeezed in tight. There were people standing in the back and in the hallway between the chapel and the entrance foyer, and the foyer was filled too. There were people downstairs in the community room, watching on the giant TV. The nursing mothers monitor and the office monitor had been placed outside on either side of the steps and people were watching on the lawn. All the younger children were sitting safely at the front left side of the chapel with their mothers. The teens and young adults had dispersed themselves in pairs among the congregation so that they could answer questions and help to encourage the guests to participate.

The twelve, had been seated behind the pulpit, looking very regal and powerful, behind Pastor Pat. The choir took up the area to the front right of the pulpit, behind and around the piano. Other chairs behind the twelve were for those who may speak, Ricky, Bree, JoJo, Gabe and Taylor.

All of this had been thrown together within a forty minute span of time.

The real professionalism though, was on display with the tech guys. They'd hooked up monitors, rounded up mics for the audience so that questions could be asked. They edited the lighting changes and the program for the new songs that Logan decided were needed. They'd gone live on the *Hopewood Chapel* website and on Gabe's website and explained why they were running late and what was taking place and asked for prayers from all of the prayer warriors out there to help make this a beautiful, maybe even Pentecostal type event, meaning, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Ameritech agents lined the walls, the foyer, the community room and manned the front door and the steps. Huntington Beach LEOs kept a close eye on the ones outside who'd opted out of the invite. Still, they'd been surprised that at least half of the protesters were now sitting inside the church.

They'd just had some rousing musical numbers. They started with "Praise" to liven things up. Their drummer, a high school kid, really showed out on that one. And then Logan led them in "This is Amazing Grace," by Phil Wickham, because he wanted to get the message across, that Jesus died for them. The lyrics, "this is amazing grace, this is unfailing love, that He would take my place, that He would bear my cross. He laid down His life, that I would be set free...." Logan wanted them to see the love *that* would require. His voice rang deep and sweet and true and if the words didn't impress them, his voice took them to heaven.

Pastor Pat smiled and spoke. "Welcome everyone. We are so grateful and humbled that you would accept our invitation to come in and join us. We are about to get this started with a prayer, but first, some ground rules."

"We expect courtesy from everyone in here. No yelling out, unless you feel like

saying hallelujah, or amen," he said with a smile.

"Hallelujah," young Eric called out from his place in the congregation, making everyone laugh.

Patrick nodded. "Thank you for that demonstration, Eric Kino, the third."

That made everyone look around to see the young movie star and Kino challenge champion.

"Okay," Pastor Pat went on. "We have mics set up and if you want to make a statement or ask a question, just raise your hand and someone will get a mic to you. Be courteous. No cursing. No bad language. Be just like a family at the dinner table on their best behavior. Ask honest questions, you'll get honest answers, but be warned. The people on this panel back here will not say things just to make you feel good. They won't lie. But everything they say will be said in love, Just like Jesus directed us to do. He said, 'As I have loved you, love one another.'" Patrick looked up and smiled.

"One more thing. The sweet lady who invited you in, her name is Shelley Kino, by the way. She is the wife of Grandmaster Eric Kino, and she promised that JoJo Adams, Gabe and Taylor and maybe a few movie stars will speak today. And yes, that will happen. But I want to tell you briefly who these eleven older gentlemen up here in front actually are. I think it's important, because this is the first time they have appeared in public together. They are very special men. They are from all over the world. Australia, South America, North America, Europe, Africa, Asia. Each of these men, when they were just ten-year-old boys had an amazing experience. They each found themselves at the brink of death. One had been trapped in an underground cave, one had wondered lost on Mt. Shasta, one had been lost in the jungle in Africa. I won't go into all of them, but they all were ten, they all were on the brink of death and they all then had an amazing experience, an angel appeared to them."

He stopped and smiled at the murmur that went through the crowd. "I know, right? It's hard to believe, but I'm telling you this because I want you to know that God is real, and He is still working today. He didn't abandon us, instead, we moved away from Him. Each of these men has been called by God, through their angel, to teach the world about Jesus. I'm not sure if the Lord will move any of them to speak today, but I'm sure hoping He will, because I am totally intrigued to hear what the Lord moves them to say. I will just quickly introduce them. From your left to right..."

Pat turned to look, hoping he would remember them all and be able to put a name to the face. "Sirs, I won't ask you to stand, but if you would give a wave or a nod of your head when I say your name, that would help."

"That first man is Dr. Ces Iman, he's from Australia. Next to him is Master Sakchai Chen who is from Thailand. Next to him is my great uncle, Reverend Ronald Clark one of the oldest of the group at age nintey-two and he's from right here in California. Next to him is Mister Andrew Musani, from Uganda, Africa. The one in plaid is Billy Wallace from Scotland and he is the eldest at nintey-eight years old!"

Patrick waited for the mumurs to cease. He smiled. "I know, he doesn't look that old, does he? Okay, so next to Mr. Wallace, is Grandmaster Eric Kino, from Hawaii. Next to him is Henrik Johansen from Norway, then Alo Quinn, who is from Oklahoma,

and Thomas Sawyer who is from Kansas. Next is Lev Vasilyev from Russia, and last but not least, Pastor Miguel Alvarez from Peru."

Pastor Pat turned back with a smile. "Thank you, gentlemen. Okay, without further ado, we have asked Pastor Alvarez to open our meeting with prayer and directly after that, I'm not sure..." He stopped and then smiled and gave a nod of his head. "Well, after that it has just been impressed upon me that we will hear from Breanna Adams Kino as our first to speak."

Ricky smiled and patted his wife on her knee. She smiled up at him. "Dear Lord, help me," she said softly to both her husband and the Lord.

Ricky leaned close to her ear and whispered. "The Lord impressed that on Pat, so that means He's in charge. Trust Him."

After Miguel offered a perfectly beautiful prayer, the chapel was quiet as Bree stood, drew a deep breath, put a smile on her face and headed to the podium.

Young Eric and Jordan looked up at her.

"Your mom is so absolutely beautiful," Jordan whispered.

Young Eric nodded. "Yeah, but right now, she's absolutely nervous."

Jordan looked closely. "Yeah, she is, bless her heart."

Young Eric chuckled. "That's adorable, Two-three, because that's what she would say if she were sitting out here."

Jordan giggled and then listened intently.

Bree smiled sweetly. "Hello everyone. I am honored to be called upon to speak to such a special group of people. So very honored. You are very special and so I also feel the burden. The burden of helping you to know that God is real, helping you to understand how much Jesus loves all of you and how much we love you. The woman who invited you in today, that's my mom and I love her and honor her so very much and one of the reasons I do is because her heart is so filled with love. She's a tough martial artist, but she has a very tender heart, and that heart has gotten her into trouble many times."

Eric nodded his head and muttered. "Truth."

Bree smiled. "I'm trying to find the words to speak that will put you all at ease and help you know that God is real. He has been active in my life, once I actually let Him in. I was twenty-seven years old when I actually considered it, even though my mother and brothers and sister and step-father all had a very close relationship with Jesus. I did not. It wasn't that I said 'no' to Him. I just never took the time to look into it. I was making movies and thinking only about my career, but that's not all it's cracked up to be."

"Well that's easy for you to say," someone called out.

Pat was up in seconds. "Bring her the mic please. Remember, just raise your hand and you can ask a question or make a comment, and keep it civil."

One of the many teen boys who now attended Hopewood Chapel ran to the person speaking and handed her the microphone. He smiled at her and nodded.

The woman, a twenty something year old with short spikey hair took the microphone. "I was just sayin' that it's easy for you to say, you don't have to work. Life is a bed of roses for you."

Bree nodded. “In some ways you’re right. But it wasn’t always. Let me tell you a little bit about myself, and that means I’ll have to share some of my mother’s private story. Is that okay, Mom?”

Shelley waved at her daughter from the front left row of children. “Go for it.”

Bree smiled. “My mom grew up dirt poor. Both of her parents worked for minimum wage. She sometimes didn’t have anything to eat. Every once in a while, she would go up to the little store on the corner where she lived and steal a candy bar or a slim jim for some protein. My mom was very pretty and she caught the attention of a college boy and he began to take her out, buy her food. It was easy for her to fall in love with the only person who’d ever paid her any attention and who fed her. My mother didn’t know God. She didn’t know anything about the Bible either. She got pregnant with me at the age of fifteen.”

Bree paused at the murmurs and nodded her head. She married my father and eventually had two more children. My brothers, Mark and Joey Adams. My father was the artsy type. He loved musical theater and I guess that’s where I got my love for acting. But his artsy side meant he didn’t want to hold a regular job and we struggled financially. I remember meals made of spaghetti noodles. No sauce. Just some noodles with a little bit of oil or butter and some salt and pepper and maybe a spoonful of applesauce on the side.” She stopped and shrugged when she heard a few “Eeews,” coming from the audience.

“Well, when you’re hungry, that’s not so bad. We had a lot of pasta, beans, rice and sometimes some ground beef as a huge treat. Every once in a while she’d bake a cake. But somehow, my mom always made ends meet. Yeah, there were times when the lights went off, or when the car got repossessed. We made it through. My mom never cried ‘woe is me, life is so hard.’ She just kept on keeping on and the reason for that is she had so much love in her heart. When she and my dad got divorced, she took on working two and three jobs at a time to make ends meet. Then she met Eric Kino. My stepfather. A man for which I have so much admiration and respect. Also the man who raised my husband and for that I thank God every single day.

“You might think that my mom meeting Eric was like hitting the jackpot.”

She stopped and laughed when everyone else did. “In a way it was. But it wasn’t because of the money. It was because he taught her that God was real. He didn’t push it on her. But she watched him. How he lived. How he played. How he prayed. How he was grateful. He knew God. He interacted with God and that was the real jackpot. As Pastor Pat said a little while ago, these men up here all had an angel appear to them when they were ten. The angel that came to Eric told him that God was real. Jesus was real.

“He actually came to earth, lived a perfect life knowing that He had to be perfect because He was going to be the unblemished lamb of God and be sacrificed on the cross to make a way for all the rest of us. His blood paid for our sins, our mistakes, our shortcomings. Why would He do that? It was pure love. A love so strong that He came specifically to be sacrificed, to suffer great pain, great anguish. The angel told Eric that Jesus really did come and do that and that He really did come back to life. He was resurrected and then before He ascended to heaven to be on the right hand of the Father,

He commissioned His followers, the twelve apostles, and others to go out and tell the world about Him and let them know that if they want to come and live in heaven, in God's Holy Kingdom, all they had to do was accept the gift, the gift Jesus gave to them by dying on the cross. The gift is real. And the gift is free.

"But it's hard for people to just accept that. What's the big deal? Well, the big deal is, life after death is real. We continue on. We really do. I didn't use to know that, but when Jesus left he sent the Holy Spirit and that Holy Spirit will bear witness to you if you simply ask God to tell you the truth of these things. So then, if we continue to live after death, where do you want to live? Do you want to live in a place of light and love and joy and happiness, or in a place of darkness and hatred and pain? I choose the light. And learning about all of this, my mom from Eric and myself from my husband, Ricky, it has brought me so much joy I almost can't express it. And I know that people who feel this, this— God joy, they just want to share it and that's why they might try to tell you or convince you that God is real. It's not to be mean to you, but because they just want to share their joy.

"It's like when you go to see a really good movie, and you immediately tell your friends or family, you gotta see this movie. They might even want to come see it again with you. Why? Because we want to share your joy. My love for every single person in this room is so great and I truly want you to feel the same joy that I feel every single day." She stopped and frowned. "It isn't the money we've been blessed with that gives us joy. It's God. It's the Holy Spirit filling us. And yes, because God has blessed us, we use it to bless others. And you people in here today, I know God loves you, and is aware of you, He sees you, and I know that because He placed you in front of us today. And listen, I know you don't know what that means yet, but there are others in this room who do know and that's why they are all grinning right now."

Bree smiled. "And for now, that's all I'm gonna say about that."

A man raised his hand and a mic was quickly brought to him. "Okay, then, so you say that God is aware of us. You say it's all about Him loving us. So, cool. He loves us. Isn't that what's important?"

Bree frowned. "I'm not sure I understand your question. I mean, it's important that you know God is real and that He loves you, yes."

"No, that's not what I mean. What I mean is, God loves me, like, just the way I am, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"Ain't no but, either He does or He doesn't, right?"

There was a murmur of agreement with the man.

Ricky rose and quickly came to the front to stand next to his wife.

"My turn," he said softly to Bree.

✝✝✝

Bree smiled gratefully at her husband. Ricky kissed her cheek and turned back to face the congregation as Bree went to take her seat.

"God does love you. And His gift of grace is free. Your good works, or my good works will not get you into heaven. Only your belief in Jesus as the Son of God, who

came to earth, died, was resurrected and ascended, only your belief in Him and actually accepting His gift will get you into heaven, or, into His kingdom, wherever that may be. But...."

He stopped and smiled. "It's a big but, and I cannot lie..."

He stopped again while everyone laughed.

Ricky nodded. "Let me give you an example. When Jesus was dying on the cross, He prayed for those who had beaten Him, those who had spit on Him and slapped Him and falsely accused Him and nailed Him to the cross with such glee. He said, 'Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do.' Why? Why would He do that? Why would He say that? It was because He loved them. And He does love us. But, people say and do whatever they wanna do, they do whatever brings them pleasure, pleasure in the moment, and then they say, 'but God loves me, so it's okay.' And they're right. He does love you, and He will love you all the way to the gates of hell. He will cry over our souls when we refuse to humble ourselves and choose Him and He will rejoice when we make the decision to follow Him. His love is more than we can ever comprehend. He doesn't want to lose one of you, which is why He asks us who know Him to go out and tell the world about Him.

"I don't know if you've ever heard the story of the adulterous woman in the Bible. She was about to be stoned to death for her sins and Jesus stopped them. He said, 'Let him without sin throw the first stone,' and one by one, they all put their stones down and went away. Sounds good, right? He didn't want them to pronounce judgement on her. But then Jesus turned to the woman and said, 'Go and sin no more.' Why? Why would He say that? It must be important to Him that we try very hard to not sin. We won't be able to be perfect, but we can try and that's all He asks is for us to try to live as holy as possible. To sin as little as possible, and His blood will pay for the rest. Why? Because if you act a certain way you will not be able to live in His presence.

"There is a whole lot in the Bible about how much God loves us. There is also a whole lot in there about keeping the commandments of God. Don't lie. Don't steal. Don't commit adultery or other sexual sins. Don't kill. The night before Jesus died, he washed the feet of His disciples, to teach them to serve one another and serve God's children and then He gave them a beautiful commandment. He said, 'As I have loved you, love one another.' How beautiful is that? So we love you. We love you all enough to want to share what we know with you. We want to watch this movie with you, so to speak."

"So, are you saying you've never sinned?" a woman called out.

A boy hurried to her with the mic and she repeated her question.

Ricky smiled and nodded. He looked out over the congregation and caught the eye of his son. Young Eric smiled up at his father and nodded back, knowing what his father was about to disclose would be difficult.

Ricky sighed. "No, I'm not saying that because I messed up a whole lotta times. When I was younger, I caved into the slew of women who threw themselves at me. I came to my senses when I remembered that I don't want to live in a depraved state of being. I wanted to be pure and wholesome. So, I repented. I got down on my knees and asked the Lord to forgive me. I asked Him for strength to not keep committing the same

sins over and over. I wanted to be pure for the woman I would marry and for the children I would raise. My sin was worse really, than others who have done the same thing, because ya see, I knew better. I knew God. I'd given my life to Jesus. I knew He was real. He'd interacted with me in my life and yet I still chose to willfully sin. And I have great regret, and yet, I know He doesn't want me to live in regret. However, He does want me to share what I've learned with others. So, then, thank you for that question which gave me the opportunity to do so."

A hand went up and the man waited for the mic.

"Okay, well all that is good for you, but why do you always feel like ya gotta tell other people what to do?"

"What do you mean?" Ricky asked. "How do I tell you what to do?"

"Not you exactly, but all of you religious people are always trying to tell everyone else what they can and can't do."

"I've got this one."

Ricky turned as did everyone else, surprised to see Alo Quinn rise from his seat and head forward.

Ricky smiled and shook the man's hand, gave a slight bow and took his seat.

"Hello," Alo said. "My name is Alo Quinn. I am a member of the Quawpaw tribe, or what people nowadays call Native Americans. I felt God move me to stand and answer this question for you."

The congregation grew very quiet as they listened to the man speak. He had a slight accent. He spoke slowly and clearly as if choosing each word carefully.

"The religious people you are speaking about, it's hard for me to say exactly, because I don't really know the real circumstances from which you speak. Sometimes there are what you call religious people who go out and preach to others, trying to tell the world about Jesus, that He is real. But in their effort to tell people about Jesus they end up almost threatening them. They do this in order to get past their defenses to a place of fear. Like, if you don't come to Jesus and repent and change your ways then you will go to hell. These people don't mean harm. They actually mean much good. They simply are going about it the wrong way. But don't get me wrong, having a little fear of God is a good thing. Just look at kids these days. They have no fear of consequences and therefore they riot and steal and act a fool. So, a little fear of a powerful God is actually a good thing."

"I can't believe you..." a young woman began as she jumped to her feet.

Pat stood. "Don't forget to raise your hand and be courteous."

The person rolled their eyes and waited for the mic. "I can't believe you would be part of this white man's God after what they did to your people."

Alo smiled kindly. "My people fought hard and were conquered. We weren't strong enough to hold the land we believed to be ours. That is only our own fault. Both sides lied and were dishonest and sometimes dishonorable. Though I must say, the land, it is all God's land to be given to whom He pleases to bring about His good and faithful plan. My people can choose to be victims and lay around drinking and crying 'woe is me,' or they can rise up and get educated and make something of themselves. It is a choice. Now,

back to the original question. 'Why are religious people always trying to tell you what to do.'

"Though they may sometimes go about it the wrong way, they are doing it out of love. They want you to repent of your sins and live holy, which means, they want you to be in God's holy kingdom to live in joy, where every tear will be dried and all the pain you suffer here on earth will be gone. All the mental anguish gone. All the physical problems, gone. They want that for you. They aren't trying to be bossy just to tell you what to do. They are trying to save you from an eternity of living in the darkness of hell."

Several hands shot up.

The two guys handling the mics rushed to two of them. Pastor Pat stood and nodded. "The young man in the rainbow t-shirt. Please go ahead."

The man raised the mic and drew a deep breath. "So like, why would a God who supposedly loves us so much send us to hell?"

Alo turned and smiled at the people seated behind him. "Gabriel, I believe the Lord wants you to answer this question."

Gabe nodded and stood. He headed straight to Alo, took him by the arm and escorted him to his seat, gave him a slight bow and headed back to the podium.

He looked out over the congregation and offered his brilliant smile. "Hey everyone, so, my name is Gabe Tanner. Sorry, I know you'd probably want to hear the answer from Mr. Quinn, but the Lord knew he was getting tired. Just two weeks ago, Mr. Quinn was wheelchair bound. But God miraculously healed him and he is now walking, but he still gets tired pretty fast. Anyway, back to the question that was asked, why would a God who loves us send us to hell? He wouldn't and He doesn't."

Gabe paused, waiting for everyone to settle down. "Hold on, let me explain. God doesn't send anyone to hell. He give us our freewill. That means the ability to choose for ourselves what we want to do, where we want to go. We can choose Him, and His Kingdom, or we can choose to live in Satan's dark, ugly and hate-filled world. And yeah, God is real. Jesus is real. And Satan is real. Satan was once Lucifer, one of God's main angels. But Lucifer rebelled against God and he and a third of the angels of heaven were cast out and that really pissed them off." Gabe looked up quickly. "Oh, uh, sorry about the language."

Everyone laughed. JoJo and Logan smiled at each other. Gabe was always Gabe. Just a great guy who was humble and loved God.

Gabe shrugged. "Anyway, Satan was so mad that he has since tried to do everything he can to take away from God what He truly loves, which is us. You and me. Satan knows it hurts God so much when he is able to convince one of us, God's children, to follow him and he works very hard at it and he's pretty smart and he uses every trick in the book. He's knows the Bible forward and backward. He deceives people. But if we choose Jesus, if we choose His light over the darkness, then we will be choosing to live in God's Kingdom. To live righteously in God's kingdom. So, God doesn't send us to hell. He allows us to choose. But..."

Gabe stopped and grinned. "And it's a big but and I can-not lie," he said in syncopation with the beat of the song they'd been imitating.

He waited while everyone laughed. “But— God has rules for His Kingdom. We can choose to follow those rules, or we can choose to live elsewhere.” Gabe smiled and nodded at the other person who’d tried to speak earlier.

“So, what are the rules?”

“Believe in Him. Love one another. Be honest with others and with yourself. Do you know the ten commandments? Like, no lying. No stealing. Do not kill. Honor your parents.”

“Hah,” someone yelled out.

Gabe nodded. “I get it. We might think that some parents don’t deserve any honor. But somewhere in there you have to break the cycle. You be the one who changes it all up. You be kind and loving to your children. You teach your children honor and respect. You teach your children that there are rules in Heaven and therefore there are rules in your own earthly home. And do it all in love. And to teach it, ya have to do it, so, forgive your parents if you think they are not great. Forgive them and teach that to your children too!”

Gabe frowned. “Hmm, now where was I? Oh yeah, the ten commandments, um, do not bear false witness which means don’t lie, be honest with yourself and with others and don’t lie about anyone. Don’t covet, which means don’t want what someone else has, like their car, their nice house, and a really big one, their husband or their wife or their boyfriend or their girlfriend. Don’t covet to me means to just be grateful for what you have, for what the Lord has already provided for you. And if you need more, talk to Him and tell Him what you need. And here’s a big one, do not commit adultery. Actually, throughout the Bible it tells you many times to abstain from sexual sins, like adultery, fornication and— homosexuality...”

Gabe had to stop as many in the congregation got upset and yelled out some things like, “that’s what I’m talkin’ ‘bout. My sex life is none of your business. God made me gay.”

Gabe nodded. “Listen, listen a minute. Calm down.”

Pastor Pat, Ricky Kino, Eric Kino, Mark, Joey and Cam all rose and the Ameritech agents stepped forward and the crowd quieted down.

Gabe drew a calming breath. “I’m not sayin’ that to be mean. I’m sayin’ that out of love. Love for you. I mean it. I can’t lie to you to make you feel better about what you’re doin’. You understand that right? I can’t lie. I love you enough to tell you the truth.”

The mic was handed to a teen girl with blue hair and several piercings.

“Y’all get quiet,” Gabe said loudly. “So we can hear what this girl has to say.”

The crowd finally quieted and Gabe smiled kindly and nodded at the girl.

She was obviously distraught and her shaky voice demonstrated that. “I got two things to say,” she said defiantly.

Gabe nodded. “Go ahead.” Gabe always seemed to thrive on confrontation. He became calmer and stronger when confronted and it seemed he could hear God’s voice even clearer. He hoped that was about to continue.

“First,” the girl went on. “You heard a bunch of people just yell out askin’ why you think you should be able to get involved in our sex life, so, what gives you the right,

huh?"

Gabe drew a deep breath. "Let me first say that I'm definitely not involved in your sex life. The words I just spoke were God's words. He's involved because He is the one who gave you life. He made rules for all of us, not just you. He made the whole world around a man and woman creating a family. You wouldn't exist without Him and as our Creator, as our Father who loves us, He gets to make the rules. I mean, really, let me break this down to like, a football game. Let's say God made the field and the ball and the players and the coaches and the refs and the rules of the game. "So, we're all down here playin' the game.

"If you carry the football outta bounds, the play ends. But that's okay, because it starts again. If you jump offsides, the play stops, you get backed up a few yards and play resumes. Sometimes in the course of play, you might get hurt, or banged up a little. You may have to sit out a few minutes, but you get back in. The teams wear different colors. Your team wears green and the other team wears red. You don't suddenly decide you're gonna join the red team. Even if you go over to their side, you're in green, so that is not gonna work. You have positions to play. If you want to play the game of football, which in this scenario is the game of life, then you have to play by the rules. If you don't, it's gonna be a hard game. Or you might get benched and sit this one out on the sidelines. Sometimes, if you do something bad enough, you might get thrown all the way out of the stadium. Or carried out, if you get hurt bad enough.

"But really now, God has the right to give us the rules to life on this world, and we've already talked about why He gives us the rules. If you didn't get it, then let me repeat it. He knows what will bring us joy and He knows what will bring us heartache. He'll let us fall down and skin our knees, he'll let us go through hard times so that we can get stronger. But He knows that the rules are for our own good. No lying. No stealing. No murdering. Honor our parents. No taking the Lord's name in vain, no worshiping idols, which by the way, includes idolizing celebrities and money and fame and fortune. No being unfaithful to your wife or your husband and no sexual, um, what's that word...um...oh yeah, sexual *deviancy*. Meaning, we do not alter what was created, male and female. We do not deviate. He made these rules. Not me. Not churches or religions. We tell you about it because we want you to be there in heaven with us. We ***love you*** and we want to share the movie with you. We want to share your joy.

"So, it's not me or us interfering in your sex life. It's our Father in heaven. And BTW, He interferes in mine too. Because there have been times when Taylor and I have been alone together, that I was sorely tempted to take things farther than just kissing her. But we remembered that we love God and when we were saved, we told God that we wanted to follow His laws and make Him proud of us, and we remembered that in just the right time. Or, actually, He reminded us of that in just the right time."

Gabe turned slightly to glance at Taylor's father. "Um, sorry, Taylor, sorry Mr. and Mrs. Kino, I know that's kind of personal information, but I thought it might help for others to see that we struggle with things too."

Ricky chuckled and gave a slight salute. "Carry on, Tanner."

Gabe grinned and winked at Taylor and turned back to the congregation.

"Um, so, you said you had *two* questions? Go ahead."

"Yeah. Okay, so like, I've was born gay. I've been a lesbian for as long as I can remember. So I know that God made me gay. And there are a lot of people like that, who know they're gay or know they are the wrong gender than what they are biologically. They've known since they were little, so, explain that one."

Gabe started to speak but JoJo rose from his seat. "I got this one, Tanner."

Gabe nodded. "Okay, but call me if you need me."

JoJo chuckled. "I love you, man."

"Love you too," Gabe muttered as he went back to his seat and took Taylor's hand, raised it and kissed it. "That was crazy," he whispered.

"You rocked it, Gabe Tanner," she whispered back.

✝✝✝

"Okay," JoJo said firmly. "Let's get into this. No yelling out. Let me say what I have to say and then ask a question. No interrupting. Let me have my say."

The crowd grumbled and mumbled a bit.

JoJo waited for them to quiet and then smiled and nodded his head. "Good. Okay. So, you just heard several people tell you that God is real. Jesus really did come to earth to live in human form, died on the cross and rose back to life. It was important for you to know that first because otherwise none of this other stuff means anything at all. It was also important that you know if God is real then Satan is real. It's important to know Satan is real because he plays a big part in the answer I'm about to give to your question. He doesn't run around with red skin and horns and a demonic face and try to get you. He's much smarter than that. He disguises himself to look like goodness and love. But he's tricky.

"So, instead of me showing you all the ways Satan can deceive us, let me just get right to what he does in light of the question you just asked. Satan doesn't play fair. He begins to work on us from the moment we are born. He works on our parents too. He will do anything to win your soul away from God. He doesn't care about you. He just wants to hurt God. So, he sends his demons, his dark forces to whisper in your ear from the time you were little babies. You are not a pretty little girl. You were meant to be a boy. Boys are better. Or, if you are a boy, you weren't meant to be a boy. It's too hard to be a boy. You would be such a pretty little girl. You ARE a girl. You ARE a boy. He doesn't play fair. He doesn't care that you are too little, too young to fight off his words, or that you don't know or understand what he's doing to you. If your parents don't know God, and don't pray over you and protect you from the dark forces of this world, then you are vulnerable. Sometimes he gets someone one to molest you. To hurt you.

"I talked to one of my classmates a long time ago and she said she turned gay when a teen male baby sitter assaulted her when she was six. Obviously, that trauma made her not like males. And if you talk to a lot of people who have gender issues, it began with something like that. But the ones who believe they were born that way, it's a lie, a lie that Satan has been whispering to you from your earliest recognition. God don't make mistakes. He formed us in his image. He created male and female. And that is all there is. If you believe yourself to be anything other than what you are, then you are lied to,

or you have been traumatized in some way or you have a mental illness. But the thing is, you can overcome this. The thought of overcoming this might seem too hard. Unbearable. But if you talk to the ones who have come back, who have overcome, they will tell you that they never knew there could ever be so much joy and happiness in their lives. Overcoming sin is joyful. God loves you. Jesus loves you and He wants you to feel that joy.

Several hands went up and JoJo nodded at the first one to receive the mic. "Go ahead guy in the black t-shirt."

"It feels like you tryin' to take away our pride. We feel good about the way we are and you tryin' to take that away."

JoJo shook his head. "'Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall.' That is Proverbs 16:18. A lot of people quote that scripture, but there are a few I like better, like, Proverbs 11:2 which says, 'When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.' Humility is important. If you want to take pride in yourself, have a pride parade full people who are proud that they overcame addiction or something like that. I'm gonna be absolutely honest with you, because you deserve honesty instead of me standing here saying, 'oh, it's okay.' Because it's not. It's not okay if I go out and steal money from the convenience store. Stealing is a sin. It's not okay if I go out and kill someone or rob them. It's not okay if I curse God, and it's not okay if I lie to you. So I won't. It says many times in the Bible to not have sex out of wedlock. That means any kind of sex. And it says several times in the Bible that homosexuality is a sin, an abomination before the Lord."

He held his hand out and went on quickly. "Would anyone think it's okay to round up a bunch of people who have robbed stores and march around bragging that they are robbers? Yay for robbers. Or have a bunch a guys parade down the street celebrating the 'I've raped a girl,' movement. And yeah, there is such a thing. Those ideas sound ludicrous, because they are. To me, a pride parade celebrates sin. If you want to have a pride parade, make it something to really be proud of. We overcame addiction. We overcame lying. We are the twenty-one year old virgin club. Something good like that."

"Give me a break. I bet you're not a virgin?"

JoJo sighed. "Yes. I AM a virgin. Because ya know what? It takes more strength to resist temptation than it does to just give in and have sex with every girl who'll let you. And because I was the QB of the football team, there were a whole lotta girls willing to let me. Remaining a virgin until you're married is a great way to start a beautiful life together. However, if you're not a virgin, it's still okay. You can still start with a clean slate right now. Right this very moment.

"When we sin, any sin, but especially when the sin messes up the family unit or the unity between man and woman, it hurts you, it hurts the Lord and then Satan rejoices. He jumps for joy with glee in his heart to see us sin. He says yeah, you're a binary cat, and he laughs. Yeah, you robbed a store and shot the clerk and he celebrates. Yeah, they're addicted to nicotine and alcohol and meth and cocaine and porn and who knows what else and he throws a celebration in the form of an award show or the halftime at the Super Bowl. Now, listen, you can hate me all you want for saying these things, but that

doesn't change the fact that I– love– you. Each and every one of you. And my family up here, they love you too. We don't condemn you. We are all sinners in some way. I'm not callin' you out. I'm not attacking YOU asked us about our thoughts on pride."

A girl raised her hand and the mic was rushed to her.

JoJo nodded at her with a smile. She was a large girl, maybe in her twenties, with a nose ring and very short, butch cut blond hair.

"Okay, so, well, I got a few things to say. First, I just wanna say that I feel like you're the first people who have ever taken the time to tell us why you feel the way you feel and I actually appreciate that."

JoJo nodded. "Well, that's nice, but I have to be honest about that. This is the first time I've seen where your side, for the most part, was willing to sit and listen and not yell and scream and get angry and throw stuff or get violent or run away."

There was a murmur in the crowd, and even a bit of laughter.

The girl nodded. "That's fair. Most of us would normally do that. We raise as much hell as possible."

"Literally," JoJo put in with a grin.

The girl laughed. "Yeah, I guess literally. But that's what we get paid to do."

The congregation grew quiet and JoJo frowned. "What? Did you just say that you get paid to protest?"

She made a face and looked around. "I mean, some do. I'm pretty sure that lots of people know that. I've seen it on TikTok and X."

"Did you get paid to come to protest here today?"

The girl looked around the audience then back up at JoJo. "Um, so, I have something else to say."

Sighing, JoJo nodded.

The girl took a minute. "I mean, look at me. No guy is gonna want me. I'm ugly. I'm fat. But my girlfriend, she accepts me for what I am."

JoJo drew a deep breath. "First, there is someone for everyone. Second, it's good that your girlfriend accepts you as you are. But now, let's be perfectly honest. You just called yourself ugly. That's the problem. Your girlfriend helps you live in that victimhood. And yeah, sitting around feeling sorry for yourself because you think you're ugly, that's victimhood. If you don't like the way you look, then change it."

He stopped to allow everyone to get quiet. "That sounds mean but that is love. It's tough love, but love none the less. You said you were overweight. Fix it. That would go a long way to help your self-esteem."

"Easy for you to say."

"No, it's actually very hard to say. But you can do it. Stop soothing yourself with food and start soothing yourself with action. Our whole family is very fit. We understand the importance of getting our bodies in tune. It keeps us close to God. That's why Kino Martial Arts studios all over the world offer fitness classes. The fitness instructors will counsel with you one on one, they will help you get motivated and your fitness WILL improve and you'll start to feel good about yourself. You have to feel good and confident and like you bring something to the table, and when that happens, your significant other

will find you, or you will find HIM. Yes, him. Because right now, you wanna feel that sexual feeling but you know you're not ready and so you say you're attracted to girls. You're not. You're attracted to the feeling you get to be accepted as you are. But that's just a bandaid. Instead, you BE the person you wanna be. Would you be willing to give yourself a chance? A chance at a new life, a new look, a new feeling?"

Her eyes filled and she quickly wiped the tears away.

JoJo turned and looked toward his grandfather, then walked over to speak with him a moment.

"Granddad, I'm way over my head. I kept expecting you to stand up and help me. I have no idea what I'm trying to say."

Eric smiled. "You are doing exactly what the Lord is having you do and say and I'm proud of you. Invite them all for free consultations with the fitness trainers and also free classes and workouts in any of the Kino Studios."

JoJo nodded and started back to the pulpit but was motioned over by Logan. He spoke quickly to Logan, nodded his head in affirmation and then went back to the pulpit. The congregation quieted. "Okay, so, first, what your name?"

"Char."

"Char?"

"Yeah, well, it's Charlotte."

"Okay, cool. So, Charlotte, I want to thank you, for being so vulnerable and asking such a personal question. Your honesty is beautiful. Now, my grandfather, who is Grandmaster Eric Kino, the owner of Kino Martial Arts, he says you and any of you who are interested, are invited to any Kino Studio for free consultations with fitness trainers and free classes and workouts."

JoJo stopped and waited. "Now, this sounds good, but it can't just be a bandaid either. This is a starting point, a start to healing your hearts and minds. This is a start to changing your lives for the better. The people here, whatever problems you're dealing with in you life, we want to help you overcome. Why? Because we love you. We don't want you to feel hurt and rejection. We want you to feel the happiness and lightness of heart that comes when you finally realize that God is real. Trust Him, and He will fill you with so much light and love and you won't feel bitter or hurt anymore. Or lonely. Or vulnerable. Or ugly. You will heal. When you show restraint from sin, whether it is sexual or any other kind of darkness, your spirit begins to feel free and it's a wonderful feeling."

He stopped and smiled. "Now, before we go any further, my brother Logan and the choir has been working on a song with a girl with an amazing voice and they want to perform a song for us. It's one Mika has been working on and wasn't quite ready to perform, but Logan asked her if she could do it today and she's willing to try. The song is called, 'I Believe You,' by Megan Woods. So, let's give a welcome to Mika Burton."

Mika rose from where she sat with the choir and came forward to near the piano and Logan went to sit at the piano. She took the microphone in her hand and drew a deep breath. Logan began to play and the choir to hum and then Mika came in with her beautiful voice.

“I'd be lying if I said that I'm okay, 'Cause right now, I'm lost and lost count of the broken prayers I've prayed. And it's true that some days it'd be easier to doubt, but Your word has never let me down— So... I believe You.”

The song was perfect. The words were perfect, and Mika’s performance was perfect. The congregation was still and quiet, mesmerized by Mika, a beautiful black girl with long, natural hair.

“When You say You're fighting for me, I believe You, when You tell me that my story isn't over just yet, I will rise up again, You promised me that I will make it through— And I believe You.”

Taylor smiled as she watched her friend sing her heart out. She gazed around the congregation and realized they could feel it. They were feeling the Holy Spirit as it moved through, touching the hearts that were open. This made Taylor’s eyes fill too. Taylor realized that Mika’s mom was out there, and Agent Thomas was with her. That was awesome. Something was happening here today and it was wonderful. God is so good. Taylor looked down as Gabe took her hand. She looked up at him and smiled. He squeezed her hand. “I love this so much,” she whispered.

Gabe nodded. “Me too. God is so good.”

Taylor nodded. “All the time.”

The choir swelled as it sang the background to Mika’s voice.

“Your love is the reason I hope, Your arms have never let me go, no fear when you know what I know, Oh Jesus, that's why— I believe You.”

The last part of the song Mika was allowed to really give it her all and she was truly amazing. She finished and the entire congregation rose and applauded.

Taylor rose to hug Mika as she made her way back to her seat with the choir. Then Taylor smiled at Pastor Pat and nodded. “It’s my turn.”

Gabe smiled. He was so proud of her. He knew she wasn’t shy, but he was still surprised and glad to see her step up. He had no idea what she would say.

“Hello everyone. My name is Taylor Kino. I’m seventeen and a high school senior. Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams Kino are my parents. Eric Kino the Third is my older brother, Jordan Brooks is his fiancé and will soon be my sister-in-law and Amari and Brittney Meeks are my foster brother and sister. Gabe Tanner is my boyfriend. I have a huge family, but I’ll stop there. I am so grateful for every single one of them. So very grateful. I’m up here because I felt moved to talk to you all for a minute today about this amazing girl that just sang to you. Mika Burton is my friend. We only met a few months ago and I want to tell you a little bit about her because she is so awesome.” Taylor glanced over at her and smiled.

“She’s probably a little nervous wondering what I’m gonna say. Mika is only sixteen years old and as you just heard, she has a real gift. Until a few months ago she was just a regular kid, goin’ to high school, an only child being raised by a single mother. Life was not too hard, but also not too easy. She made pretty good grades, she had a boyfriend, but inside, inside her soul, she knew there was something missing. She wasn’t very happy. She just went through life as usual. Doing pretty much the same things the kids around her were doing. Then last December a few weeks before Christmas, she

visited this church. We were having a tree decorating pizza party and my cousin, Logan, he was in charge of taking care of providing some music.

"When Mika found out he was putting together a choir and needed some local people, she felt moved to join. Well, Logan knew immediately that this girl's voice was special and he began to work with her. But the thing is, that's not the best thing that happened. What happened was Mika came to church and listened to some great messages and she felt the Holy Spirit move through her. Jesus was touching her spirit, touching her life and when that happened, everything changed. Her whole life changed. Some bad things happened too, but they're too personal for me to tell, but the thing is, the bad things happened because the bad guys, Satan and his demons, they didn't want Mika to find the light. But she was strong. She changed the way she thought. She changed the way she lived. She started doing things she needed to be doing, like honoring her mother by helping out at home, and she stopped doing things that she shouldn't be doing. She started listening to Jesus' voice and it was so cool to see Him working in her life.

"Just those few changes started the ball rolling and suddenly her life is completely different. Her mom got a new job where they can spend more time together, doin' like, mother and daughter things together. Mika told me this past Christmas was the best Christmas she's ever had. Not because they had more money, but because she finally understood it was about Jesus and her mom was beginning to feel that too. The spirit and love was strong that day for her.

"Mika has new friends who really love her for her and not because she had a popular boyfriend. She loves to sing and Logan, who is dropping his first album this spring, is helping her to take her music further. Mika is humble and kind and I just love her so much. And I'm telling you all this, well, first because I felt moved to do so by the Lord, and second, I see that Mika's story is inspirational. She only had to take the first few steps and the Lord took over. He healed her heart. He healed her soul. And now, she told me, she actually looks forward to waking up every morning, to facing each day and see what God has in store for her. And because I love Mika so much, I love seeing what God is doing in her life. I love seeing the smile on her beautiful face and the light in her eyes. Anyway, so, I just wanted to share that with you. Thanks for letting me speak to you all today."

Taylor smiled at Mika and went back to her seat next to Gabe, who took her hand and leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"Love you," Gabe whispered.

"Love you more," Taylor said back.

Gabe rolled his eyes.

A woman stood and raised her hand and the mic was handed to her.

Pastor Pat went to the podium and nodded his head at her.

"So, we've heard from several people now, and you've all talked about the gays and gender phobic type people, but you haven't said anything about the other group who was protesting and I know you know I mean us women who don't want our rights taken away. Our body our choice," she yelled out, expecting people to join her, maybe pick up the chant but no one did.

Pat nodded. "I suppose it's time to tackle that issue." He paused to see if the Holy

Spirit was gonna put anyone's name in his head like it did earlier, but the same name as earlier came to right back to his mind. "Um, Breanna Kino? Do you want to take this?"

Bree nodded and stood and came to the pulpit. She looked down at her mother. "Mom? Will you come up here too?"

Surprised, Shelley motioned for the ladies to watch her children and headed up to stand beside her daughter. Bree then looked down at her sister. "Jeffy, um, Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace? Will you also join me?"

Jeffy handed Eli off and headed up there.

Bree leaned toward the mic. "Is there a particular question you want to ask?"

"Yeah, why would you, or people like you, why would you want to take away a woman's right to choose to have a baby or not? It's my body. How could you possibly feel like it's your right to tell me what to do with my body?"

Shelley leaned forward. "We have laws in this country that protect us. It's against the law for someone to go into your home and steal your stuff. So, that means we made a law against that. We made a law telling someone that they can't go in and steal your stuff. We also made a law that you can't go to a store and steal stuff. You can't go into a bank and steal the money. You can't assault your neighbor. You can't threaten to kill someone. You can't murder someone. These are all laws that help us to have a decent society. It's against the law to drive drunk and especially when we drive drunk and hit or kill someone. But there are laws against all these things and we feel like they are good laws, because we need to be protected from criminals. Now, the criminals may feel like it's just not right, or it just isn't fair to tell them that they can't do those things to people, but we can all see that those laws are necessary. Can we agree on that?"

Shelley heard no reply but saw several heads nodding.

Bree took up the lead. "We get even harder on those laws when someone hurts children. Child abuse, child trafficking, child kidnapping, child murder, we get pretty angry about children being hurt. And like, those children we all heard about several years ago who'd been found half starved and chained to their beds, we were mad about that and our hearts hurt so much for those children. Of course, everyone spoke up and had their two cents worth to put in about that. But the most helpless, the most innocent, hardly anyone speaks up to defend them. And of course, I'm talking about the tiny babies in our wombs. Why can we not give these tiny people the protection they deserve? We'll protect other children, we'll protect adults, we'll even protect the criminals who went to prison for hurting or murdering other children or adults, but the tiniest, most helpless, we need to protect them too."

Jeffy leaned toward the microphone. "We're not talking about a few hundred little babies, or a few thousand babies. We're not even talking a million. In the last ten years there has been over 730 million babies aborted worldwide. Seven-hundred and thirty million."

Hands flew up. "Yes, Pastor Pat nodded at the first one with a mic."

"What's in our bodies are not babies yet. They're just a clump of cells."

"They are a clump of cells just like you are a clump of cells," Jeffy said quickly. "They are human life. Just at a more delicate stage of growth. Human life begins at the moment of conception. They are real humans."

Pastor Pat called on another woman with a mic.

"When it is in my body, it's just a part of me, part of my body and I should have the right to decide what to do with my body."

Jeffy shook her head. "No, that's where you're wrong. That baby inside your womb is a separate person from you, with its own DNA different from yours. It's a living human being. Once conception has taken place, it is not longer just your body. It's now two different people. And sorry, you might not like that, but that is what comes with being female. That's is how God intended things to be. The woman will carry the child inside her body until it's grown enough to be born. It will still die if not taken care of outside the body, but either way, that is a human life. A vulnerable human life."

Pastor Pat pointed. "The girl in the purple shirt."

"Still, it's inside MY body and I still say my body my choice."

Shelley leaned forward. "It is your body, your choice before you conceive. So maybe you should choose to not have sex until you want a baby. Definitely not have sex before marriage."

"What a hypocrite," another yelled out and a mic was rushed to her. "Your daughter just stood there and told us that you got pregnant when you were fifteen."

Shelley nodded. "Yes. I did. And I've repented for the things I've done wrong and I've been forgiven. I'm not being a hypocrite. Everyone has made mistakes in their past. That is what is so beautiful about Jesus. He paid for our sins and our mistakes and we are forgiven and then He fills us with so much joy and so much love and then we see how living as He would have us live, holy and righteous, we see how it does away with all the heartache and guilt and fills us with joy."

Bree leaned close. "And I gotta say that I'm so glad that my mom didn't decide to abort me when she got pregnant. I'm glad to be alive."

Shelley smiled and leaned over and touched her daughters cheek, then turned back to face the congregation. "The point is, if we obey God's laws of chastity and holiness and love, forgiving one another, loving one another, not shaming each other but helping each other, then the world would be so beautiful. But let me tell you about something we haven't discussed concerning abortion. Back in biblical times, the people worshiped idols and they actually sacrificed their children to the gods they worshiped."

Jeffy opened the Bible on the lectern and read. "In Deuteronomy 12:31 it says, 'You must not worship the LORD your God in this way, because they practice for their gods every abomination which the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.'" She stopped and looked around at the silence, then decided to go on. "And in um... Jeremiah 32 it says, 'They have built the high places of Baal in the Valley of Hinnom to make their sons and daughters pass through the fire to Molech—something I never commanded them, nor had it ever entered My mind, that they should commit such an abomination and cause Judah to sin.' So, why do you think my mother was bringing this up?"

Bree leaned forward. "Remember, we have already talked today about Satan and his demons, that they are real and they work very hard against us, the children of God. Satan is absolutely delighted that 730 million people have elected to sacrifice their children. Only it wasn't to an ancient god. It was for convenience. The baby was not convenient,

or would be hard to feed and care for, or the mom was just not ready, or the father took off, or she doesn't even know who the father is, or any other inconvenience. Satan is laughing and relishing each tiny human life sacrificed. And it's not just the tiny unborn baby, but the mother too, committing horrible offenses before God."

More hands went up and Pat called on another woman. "Well then, what's the alternative? Because it's not like people are gonna stop having sex and stop getting pregnant."

Jeffy nodded. "Okay, well that is a two-fold question. First, looking back in history, if abortion had never been legalized people would have to be responsible for their actions and it would happen *less*. But we can't go back in time, can we? So, looking forward, we teach morals, we take responsibility for our actions and the problem begins to lessen. And for those who do get pregnant, we don't shame them like was done back in the 1940s and 50s, but we help them, we teach them, we place babies in good homes without trying to make money off of them and we eradicate this evil of killing babies. Because like the sound of it or not, abortion IS murder. It is the killing of another human being and it should be illegal."

The congregation clamored as they discussed with each other what had just been said.

Shelley's eyes looked over the crowd carefully. She didn't know that the men behind her and the agents in the building also watched everyone carefully.

Several hands went up and Pat called on a youngish girl, maybe a teen.

"What about rape? Should I not be able to abort a pregnancy caused by rape?"

"Yeah," several of the people yelled out. "What about that?"

Jeffy leaned forward. "Okay, so, rape related pregnancies in the US are about 1% of all pregnancies. I've heard people use that 1% as a reason to not worry or think about this problem, but that's not true. Considering there are 5.5 to 6 million pregnancies approximately in the US every year that means approximately 55 to 60 thousand pregnancies are the result of rape in the US and that is a lot of people."

"So, you agree with us, that we should be able to abort a rape pregnancy?"

"Please remember to raise your hand and wait for the mic and let's all be courteous to each other," Pastor Pat said quickly.

"Sorry," the woman said, "but answer the question."

Jeffy smiled. "I'm on your side, but I don't agree with you."

"How could you even think..." the woman began, but Jeffy interrupted.

"It's horrible when someone is raped. Horrible. The rapist should be severely punished. But the child, that child is innocent. Why should that child have to die because of the sins of his or her father? That's like doubling down on the sin. The only way to make that sin worse would be to kill the innocent child."

"Well, I think forcing a girl to carry the child of her rapist is also doubling down on that sin."

Bree sighed. "It's a matter of perspective. We can help the girl deal with everything. We can make something good come from that or we can turn her into a murderer."

"How in the world can you make something good come from it," a woman screamed out.

Suddenly a young girl in the congregation rose from her seat. She moved out of her row and started up the aisle.

Jeffy smiled. It was Brook. She walked bravely up toward the front. An agent started toward her to stop her, but Shelley called him off.

"It's okay. She's one of our family."

Brook smiled at that at came up to join them.

They stepped back so she could get to the microphone. "Stay close to me," she whispered to the three women.

"I want to answer your question," Brook said, her voice shaky. She cleared her throat. "My name is Brook Tattersall. I just turned fifteen this past December. But when I was fourteen, my drunk step-father, Darrin Hopkins, the real estate guy, he came to my bedroom and raped me."

She stopped while the crowd grumbled.

"I am now four months pregnant. But I don't think of the baby as his child. I think of him or her as my child, or more importantly, as God's child that is just gonna come into this world in a weird way. I could be all regretful and crying poor pitiful me, but I don't. And the reason for that is the wonderful people who are taking care of me."

"Do they not have any compassion for you?"

"They have so much love and compassion for me. They know that if I make myself a victim, it will take me a lot longer to recover. But I am not letting my step-father's actions ruin my life. I'm making something good from it. Carrying a child inside my body, it's not the end of the world. I'll get through this. And it's their attitude and my own attitude that can make me or break me. I can cry over all the changes in my body, or I can see this as an obstacle to overcome. I am so much stronger now than I was just a few months ago. I have a wonderful support system."

"Yeah, well not everybody has someone like the Kinos to help them."

"That's true. But they can call on the *Angel Network Foundation*. It is a wonderful organization that is run by a lady named Angel Lee. Her husband is the owner of *Ameritech Security* and together they are working miracles in peoples' lives. They take care of girls and women with unwanted pregnancies. They support them, educate them, get them medical care, and even house them. And then they help place the babies in good homes. By the way, to all the people watching this on the livestream. The *Angel Network* can always use your donations and they will put them to good use and they are helping sooo many girls and women."

"Yes," Brook said as she called on a lady with her hand raised.

"Tell the truth. Don't you think it would be better for you if you could just end the pregnancy?"

Brook sighed. "Well, it would probably be a little easier on my body, but..."

"But not on your mind!" a girl yelled out.

Taylor's jaw dropped and her eyes opened wide. She watched as Mika got up from her seat with the choir and moved to stand next to Brook.

She leaned toward the mic. "Before I cleaned up my act I was sexually active. My boyfriend was very persuasive and very insistent when it came to sex. What I'm about to tell you, I've never told anyone this before. Not my mom. Not my good friend Taylor.

And I hope it doesn't make you hate me. But I got pregnant."

Tori Burton, Mika's mom gasped. Taylor schooled her features.

"I was barely fifteen and my boyfriend told me to have an abortion and I did. The people at the clinic made it seem like it was nothing. Just a clump of cells, like you said. But it wasn't. After it was all over, I felt so much grief. Unbearable grief. I'm not even sure why. I'm sure a therapist could explain it to me. But I thought about taking my own life several times. What's worse, is about six month later, I got pregnant again and that time Teo forced me to get another abortion."

She stopped talking as emotions overcame her and Shelley immediately pulled her close and hugged her. Then Mika got control and turned back to the mic. "So, I'm really glad for Brook, that she has a support team. And I think it's great that she's decided to have the baby." She turned to Brook. "Are you gonna keep it?"

Brook shook her head with a smile. "No. I decided that I can give the baby life, but it would be too hard for me to take care of it. So, the *Angel Network* has already found a family who wants the baby."

"Did they pressure you to have the baby?" another woman asked.

Brook shook her head. "No. They actually told me they would support me and take care of me no matter what decision I made. They only asked that I study and read from both sides all the pros and cons before I make my decision. And they asked me to pray about it and I did and when I thought about having the baby, my body and mind would like, relax, and the stress would go away and I knew it was the right thing to do. Also, I listened to a lot of videos from people who were children of rape and listening to them talk about how glad they were to be born and living life and I just felt like, with the right support, with positive support and love, this could turn out to be a happy story."

Brook turned to Mika. "I'm truly sorry that you had to go through all that."

Mika shrugged. "I did it to myself. But Taylor and Mr. Logan Adams came along and brought me so much salvation and so much love. And I guess that's what this whole meeting has been about. These people that tell us the right way to act and things to do or not do, they're not being mean and they don't have any hatred in their hearts. They are just so filled with love and they truly want you to feel the same joy and they do. And ya know what? I do too! I want you to feel what I feel now, now that I've given my life to Jesus and I am forgiven and I am free. It's all just too good."

The whole place became silent as Grandmaster Kino rose from his seat and headed to the pulpit.

He hugged each person before the went to sit. He told Mika how proud he was of her and that she probably just brought hundred of people to Christ and gave hope to a whole bunch of teens. He said pretty much the same to Brook. He kissed both Jeffy and Bree on the cheek and told them 'well done, ladies.' And then, he took Shelley's hands and squeezed them and leaned forward and touched her forehead to hers. "I am unworthy of you, my Shelley girl."

She blinked up at him, then giggled. "Give me a break," she muttered.

But the entire congregation could hear the exchange and they all chuckled.

✝✝✝

1 Peter 3:15-16

"But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

Chapter Thirty-Five (Epilogue)

Eric smiled as he watched his wife walk back to her seat and then turned that smile on the congregation.

Raylynn and Kaylee Quinn sat with their mother, their hearts glowing with the spirit that filled the room. Ray leaned over to whisper to her mother. “I’ve always loved the way Grandmaster Kino smiles. His smile is so filled with love and kindness, and I compare it to when he’s being fierce, like when he’s training someone and the difference is so strange.”

“I understand what you mean,” Dani whispered.

Kaylee sighed. “Yeah, me too, but the first time I spoke to him, he wasn’t smiling, he was being very, um, firm, I guess you could say.”

Dani giggled. “I guess he knew just what my little girl needed.”

“Hello, everyone. My name is Eric Kino. I just have a few things to tell you, a few things to say to you and a few points to make and then the choir has one more song prepared for you and they would love you to sing along. The words to the song will appear on the monitors. Okay, so first, if you will look at the pew rack in front of you, you should see some paper and pens. Before you leave today, if you have anything you might need help with, an illness, some trauma you’re dealing with, a financial situation, a relationship situation, even a legal matter, anything at all that you might need help with or want help with, please give us your name and a way to contact you. It would make it easier if you put down the nature of the problem. It doesn’t have to be a big explanation, just one word... trauma... finances... legal...etcetera. Just one word will do. And it can be more than one thing. We have great resources and we can help and counsel you and that process will bring you healing and great joy. Please don’t be shy.”

“Why would you want to do this?”

Eric smiled. “Because the Lord put you in front of us today. Whomever He puts in front of me, I assume He wants me to serve, or sometimes, rebuke, or set straight. Therefore, I will be in service to each of you in some way or another. You don’t have to join this church. You don’t have to believe what we believe. Me helping you is not conditional. We will serve whom the Lord puts in front of us, for He has a plan and I trust Him.”

He stopped and smiled. “What my daughter said earlier today, that she knows God sees you, because He put you in front of us today, that is true. Everyone here, everyone downstairs, everyone out on the lawn, and I will add that those listening livestream, if there is a problem in your lives and you need help, please reach out. You can send letters or emails through the address given on Hopewood Chapel’s website or on Gabe’s website. The help may not come in the way you imagine. It may be much better than that, for the Lord sees and knows things that we don’t see for ourselves.

“Okay, so that being said, once I speak to you about what God has placed on my

heart to speak to you about, and once the choir and you have sung, one of our guests, Andrew Musani, a strong and amazing servant of God from Uganda, Africa who spent the last ten years of his life imprisoned for his belief in Jesus, he will come forward and pray and also bless the food. We will dismiss after the prayer, and we will walk over into the parking area of the apartments that are right next door to this church and you will see about twenty food trucks. Order whatever you'd like and we'll eat together and laugh together and talk together as a family should. But as a father will warn his children, I will tell you, this event is to be peaceful. No arguing, no yelling, no cursing, no harm. Only love." He stopped and smiled. "Or at least 'like'. Courtesy and kindness and respect will prevail or you will be escorted away. Keep in mind that children will be present."

Eric smiled and nodded. "Okay then. So the theme of this meeting to me has not been homophobia or transphobia or abortion rights. The theme of this meeting has been love. We invited you in to show you that we do not have any hatred in our hearts. We have a deep love for all of God's children and we only want you to experience the same joy that we have found through Jesus Christ our Lord. And He is the only door. Not all religions lead to the Father, to heaven, to God's Kingdom. If you've been told that then it's a lie. Remember, Satan is a liar and he is very tricky. He lies well because he knows the truth. He can make things sound good that are not really good and he does that to make you think that you can do anything you want, believe anything you want and you will live forever in the Kingdom of God. That is not true. Jesus is the only way. However, His gift is totally free. The only thing you have to do is believe in Him, and accept His gift.

"Still, here is where things get a little iffy for everyone. Once we truly submit ourselves to Jesus, believe in Him, accept His gift, the Holy Spirit will fill you and you are born again. Meaning, you are starting fresh. Your sins forgiven. You are like a new baby. Free of sins. Free of darkness. Free of hatred. But if you don't really accept Jesus, but only do it on the surface, then it won't change you. Jesus knows your heart. He also knows if you are trying and failing and trying again. He understands your struggles. He only asks that you try. He will help you to learn and grow and evolve.

"Jesus said the gift is free. He paid for our sins. His blood was sufficient. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. His sacrifice did it all. But then why did He also say, 'If you love me keep my commandments,' and why did He tell that adulterous woman to 'go and sin no more.' Why did He give very strong warnings about guarding against sin? He said, 'If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away... And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.' I mean, that's a pretty strong statement. Why would He say that if it doesn't matter if you sin. That's because it DOES matter. That's why it seems to you that people look down on you, or even hate you. Again, we don't hate you. But we do look down on sin and pray that you will see the light.

"In the same way, if I found my son was hooked on pornography, I would speak to him, intervene, and help him to overcome. Why? Because I love him. I hope you understand. I can only say this so many ways. So, what we know because we are close to God and hear His voice, we know that abortion is a sin. It is murder and it is an

abomination to God. Killing babies makes Satan happy. And yes, they are human babies from the moment of conception. I am not here to aruge that with you. It is a fact. A scientific fact. Stop killing your children. Stop having sex. To be blunt, ladies keep you legs closed and men keep it in your pants and stop trying to take every female you can. Having sex outside of marriage is a sin. There is a reason God make this law. Show some restraint. It's difficult. I know. Gabe Tanner just told you how hard it is to show restraint, and JoJo Adams just told you that it takes more of a man, a much stronger man, to show restraint rather than going after everything in a skirt. But God does not tempt you beyond what you can endure. Pray to Him to give you strength. He will.

"Moving on, homosexuality is a sin and so is any other abomination. Transgenders, bi this and bi that. That is Satan telling you things since you were a baby. You can overcome this. Think about this. Why would Satan take time to go after little old you? What makes you so important? You must be meant for big things and he doesn't want you to find the light. Step up. Be strong. Find the light. Trangenderism and all the other deviant things like thinking you are a cat or a dog, or whatever, this is mental illness. And anyone who encourages you in this, thinking you are finding your own identity, is not caring for you or loving you. You don't lie to people you love. There are only two genders and two sexes. Male and female. If you feel you are anything else, then that is the dark forces of this world grabbing you and holding you. And Satan has made this sex confusion thing so prominent because He knows if he distorts the family unit then he wins.

"Now it's easy to see that sin has a huge part in seducing people away from the normal family unit. Men beating their wives and children. Getting drunk. Not providing. Women being unfaithful. Husband and wives not respecting each other. Not respecting the roles they are given to fulfill. Women who call themselves queens and expect their husbands to be subservient to them or to placate their every want. Men who are weak and have no idea what to look for in a wife. Sin where either a man or woman cannot control their temper and they beat and abuse their children. Men committing ungodly acts against the children in their care, as Brook described. An angry man. A nagging wife. All of these sins and many more have contributed to the tearing down of the family unit. And shaming people. What I mean by that is, hmm, so in the example I gave a minute ago, I said if my son was hooked on pornography. Well, I would help him. Not shame him. Not throw him out or scream at him. If a girl gets pregnant, we don't shame her. We forgive and help her. We don't ostracize people who fall. We help them find their way back. We don't accept the sin, but we do help and love the sinner. Do you understand?

"The people who spoke here before me, they were being gentle in their reprimand. I am being firm. Why? Because I want you to know beyond a shadow of a doubt what I am saying. I am not calling you out to be mean. I am calling on you to be saved. You are not the only sinners in this room. I sin every day. I try, and that is what Jesus asked us to do. Try. He knows our hearts. You do not have to overcome and be perfect before you come to Him. The cool thing about Jesus is He will meet you where you are. Jesus said, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' This is a direct invitation for you to come to Jesus with exactly what you are carrying right now.

"Okay, so, lastly, and this is important, so listen up because I'm gonna call out our

own. Many Christians these days since they know Jesus has paid for their sins and the gift is free, they think they don't have to try to live holy. They go on cursing, drinking, listening to music that is filled with sex and violence, they cheat on their work hours, or use tricky sales tactics. They still gossip, or tell lies. They might call them little white lies, but they are not being honest and that's the problem. They wear a dress for an event and the return it. They complain about food in a restaurant hoping to get it free. They don't read their Bible and then sometimes they worship the Bible instead of worshiping God. They pick up a lost wallet and remove the money before returning it. They find it hard to forgive someone who's wronged them. They talk ugly to each other on social media. I could go on and on about what us Christians do without thinking. Well, when I died last August and spoke to Jesus under a tree, He told me a whole lotta things. Astonishing things. And He gave me three very good reasons to live holy, to live nobly, to live honestly and do everything we can to keep the commandments of God. Three things.

"Number one, living as righteously as possible keeps us in tune with God. It raises our vibration closer to His vibration, our frequency closer to His frequency and when we are in tune with Him, we can hear His voice much clearer. So that first one is a very good reason to allow the Holy Spirit to change us into righteousness.

"Number two is living as righteous as possible is how we put on the armor of God each and every day. We are told to put on the armor of God. Do you think that just saying, 'okay God, armor up,' is all you have to do? If you are living unrighteously, lying, stealing, fornicating, etcetera, then how can we expect God to protect us. What is the armor of God? It is found in Ephesians chapter six. The belt of truth. The belt of truth guards against the lies of the enemy, which we just talked about. But also means we must tell the truth. We must be honest in all dealings. Do it in love and kindness, yes, but tell the truth. What is the next one? Anyone?"

"The breastplate of righteousness," half the people called out.

Eric nodded. "Correct. The breastplate of righteousness. The breastplate protects all the vital organs so this one is very important. Live righteously. Holy. What's the next one?"

He heard a smattering of things and chuckled. "The next one is 'feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.' Are we ready to teach the gospel like we have today, are we ready to do that at any time? Anyone know the next one?" Eric asked.

"The shield of faith," many called out strongly.

Eric nodded in appreciation. "Right. So if you keep your faith strong, trust God, then 'you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.' How important is that? And the next thing mentioned is the 'helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.' So, read your Bibles. Anyway, the point Jesus was making to me, is live as righteously and holy as possible and we will be able to protect ourselves and others from the dark, evil forces of this world."

Eric stopped and drew a deep breath. "Okay, and the third reason is exactly for allowing what has taken place here today. The third reason for living as holy and righteously as we can is not to save our selves, for we are not saved by our works. It is to save *others.* Our good works, our righteousness, it shines like a light, a light so bright

that others will see and want to seek God's light for themselves. That's what happened today. My wife felt a rush of love for the young lady on the street. She felt moved to a motherly gesture of pushing the hair from the girl's eyes. That loving gesture, my wife's light shining, is what made a day like today possible. A day where we've been able to share our light and hopefully help others to find true, real and lasting joy."

Eric looked around and changed his firm features into the warm smile that people love so much. "My friends and family, we were warned that in these last days we will call what is evil good and what is good evil. That is happening. It happened outside this church this very morning. The devil lies well, because he knows the truth. My fellow Christians, do not be lukewarm. Be on fire for Jesus. Be on fire for righteousness, but do it with love and kindness. However, don't tickle ears and tell people what they want to hear. Don't tell them that what they're doing is okay, if it's not. Find a way and be brave and strong. Don't coddle. Help people get out of victimhood. Victimhood is a mental virus. Don't coddle but do be kind. It's a fine line, but I know you can walk it.

"People, Jesus is real. He was born of a virgin, became a human, lived a perfect life, went to the cross willingly to pay our way into heaven. He died and came back to life. He was resurrected and ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father. He is real. He has made Himself known to me. He is so full of love and kindness and when you are in His presence, you never want to leave. When you are in His presence you feel no sadness, no stress, no worry, no hatred, only joy. Pure unshakeable joy and I want that for everyone, every single one of you and I pray that is exactly what you will be blessed with this day. If any of you want to give your life to Jesus today and anytime, and you're not quite sure how to do it, then talk to any one of us. We will lead you through. It's not hard. There is no ritual that must be followed. There are no hoops to jump through. You only have to believe. And if you'd like to take it further and be baptized, we can help you with that. We love you and pray God fill you right now, right this very moment with His powerful Holy Spirit, in Jesus' mighty name I pray, amen and amen."

"Amen," several people called out.

Logan rose and went to the piano, the other musicians picked up their instruments, the monitors came on and the air was filled with music, and to some, they thought they heard the angels singing in heaven.

✝✝✝

Romans 12:2

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what
God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

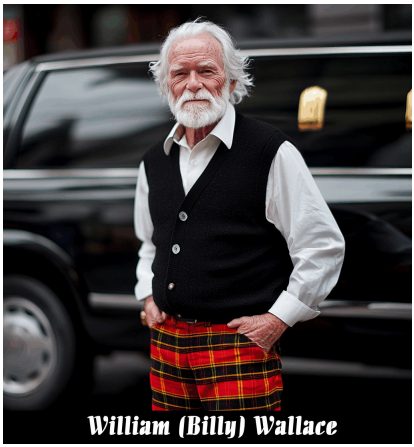
Oh Father, how I love You, how I praise you. I am so grateful for you calling me to write these books. I pray they will bring healing and love and Your Holy Spirit to each and every person who reads them. Fill them Father, touch their hearts, minds and spirits. Give them clarity and amazing epiphanies! Provide for them and their loved ones. Heal relationships, take away addictions or pain or illness. Give them peace and comfort. I pray in Jesus' mighty name, amen and amen.

Coming up in #15 Such A Time As This-In Jesus' Name Part 2

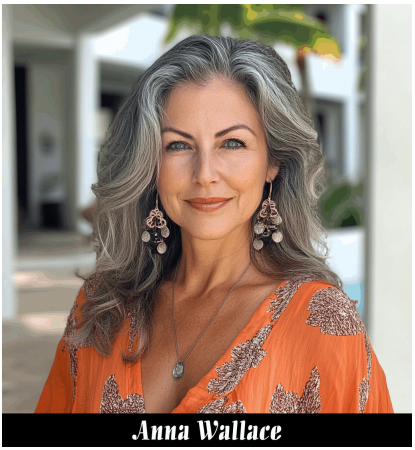
- How does Ryder's first meeting with his mother turn out?
- What will happen if Jeanette tells her husband the truth about Ryder?
- What will Cam and Billy find when they search for Malcolm Wallace?
- How does Jordan's softball season turn out?
- Does Gabe finish his training?
- Will JoJo find a career?
- How do Brody's and Peyton's college baseball seasons go?
- Will Jake finally make it home to Melaynah?
- Any proposal's coming up?
- Any babies born?
- Taylor's new friend? Charlie? Hannah? Jewell? Ryder? End times?
- Will Jesus arrive to collect His bride?
-

Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace and Elijah Cameron Kino Wallace

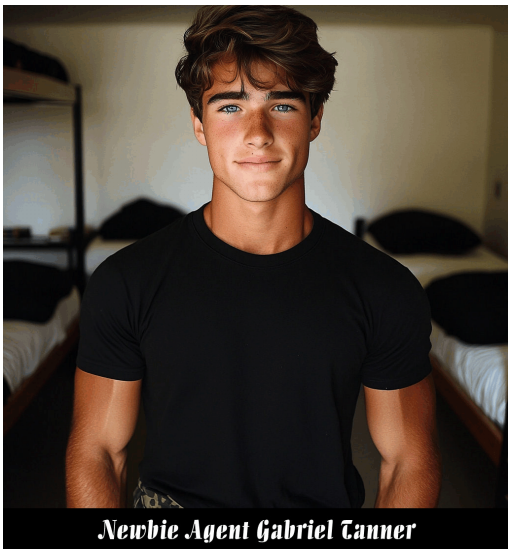
Cam Wallace



William (Billy) Wallace



Anna Wallace



Newbie Agent Gabriel Tanner

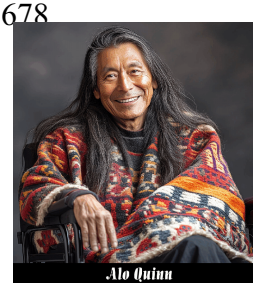
Lily Tanner

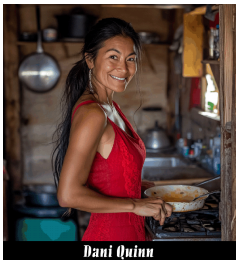
Justice Sawyer

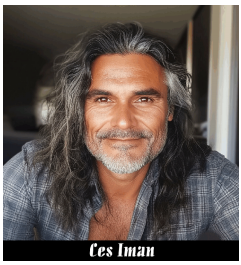
Thomas Sawyer

Ryder Bell

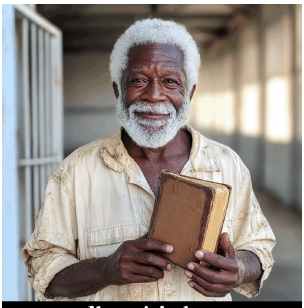
Tamika Burton

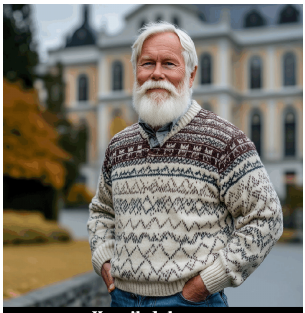

Alo Quinn


Dani Quinn


Ces Iman

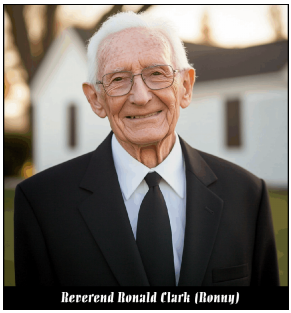
Hazel Iman

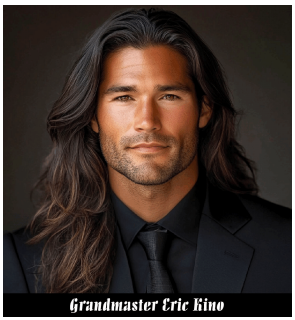

Musani Andrew

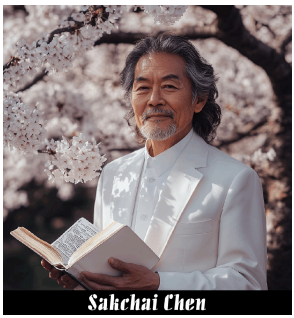

Henrik Johansen

Miguel Rohas Alvarez

Lev Vasilyev


Reverend Ronald Clark (Ronny)


Grandmaster Eric Kino


Sakchai Chen

While you wait for either #15 or for *Stories of The Twelve*,
go back and reread or relisten to Books 0-14. You won't believe how much you missed and how much more insight you get the second and even third times through!

Pi anyone?

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651328230664709384460955058223172535940812848111745028410270193852110555964462294895493038196442881097566593344612847564823378678316527120190914564856692346034861045432664821339360726024914127372458700660631558817488152092096282925409171536436789259036001133053054882046652138414695194151160943305727036575959195309218611738193261179310511854807446237996274956735188575272489122793818301194912983367336244065664308602139494639522473719070217986094370277053921717629317675238467481846766940513200056812714526356082778577134275778960917363717872146844090122495343014654958537105079227968925892354201995611212902196086403441815981362977477130996051870721134999999837297804995105973173281609631859502445945534690830264252230825334468503526193118817101000313783875288658753320838142061717766914730359825349042875546873115956286388235378759375195778185778053217122680661300192787661119590921642019893809525720106548586327886593615338182796823030195203530185296899577362259941389124972177528347913151557485724245415069595082953311686172785588907509838175463746493931925506040092770167113900984882401285836160356370766010471018194295559619894676783744944825537977472684710404753464620804668425906949129331367702898915210475216205696602405803815019311