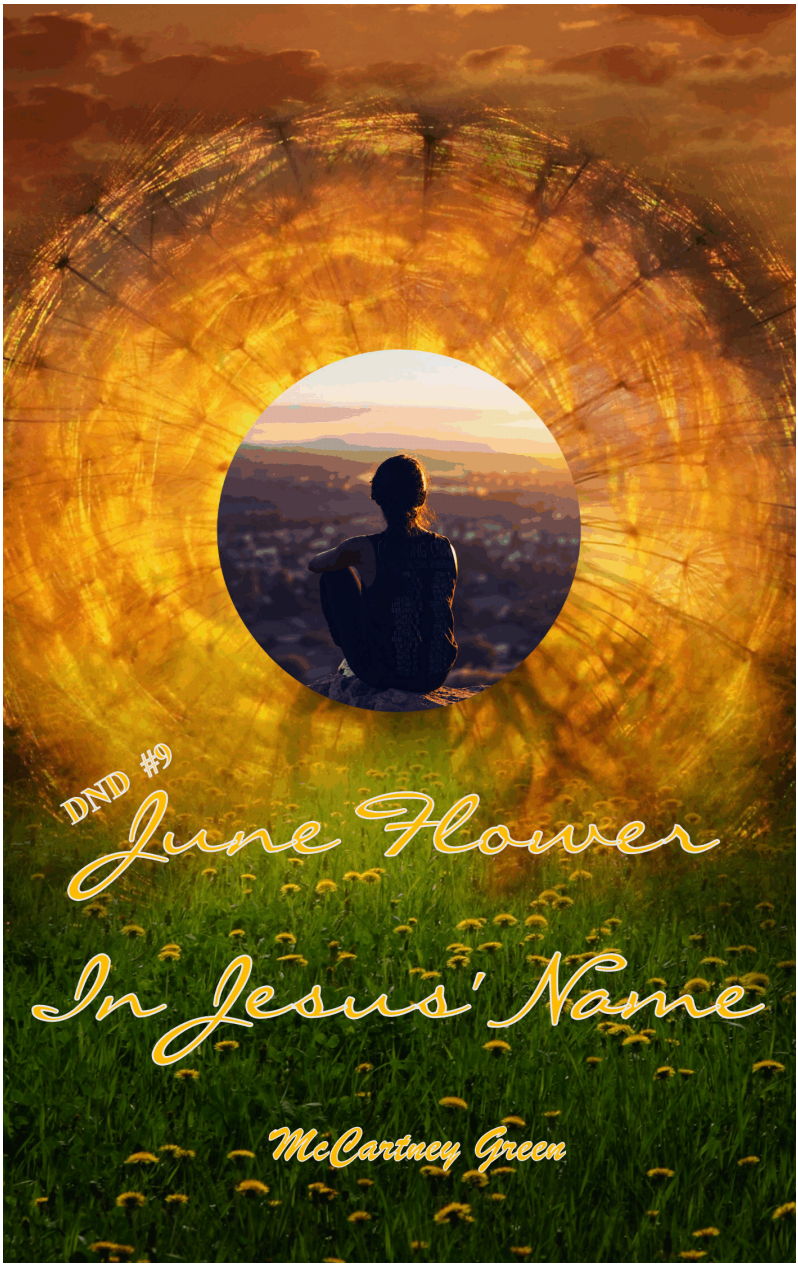

DND #9
June Flower
In Jesus' Name
McCartney Green

DND #8

June Flower
In Jesus' Name

McCartney Green

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

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

Keeping Tabs

In the Prologue it's late February and ...

West Coast Families

Senior Kino Family

Eric Kino is 66. Hard to imagine. He's as fit and hunky as ever.
Shelley Adams Kino is 61 and still a babe in perfect condition.
June Flower Kino (Jeffy) is 25, but will be 26 next month on March 15th.

Junior Kino Family

Ricky Kino is 48 and still makes the women gaga. Though he still acts, he has assumed a larger role in running the renowned Kino Martial Arts Studios, and also does fight choreography for film.
Breanna Adams Kino is 45 and proving to the world that 45 is the new 25. She is a highly sought-after actress and is considered the elite of the elite in Hollywood, though she is absolutely dedicated to family and is very selective about her roles.
Eric Kino III is 17, a high school senior heartthrob though he tries to keep a low profile. He received Governor's honors in his academic studies in physics and math and is considering all paths to being accepted into the Astronaut Candidate Class.
Taylor Kino is 13 and a gorgeous Jeffy look-alike. She seems to be following in her parents' footsteps because she is madly in love with her adopted-cousin, Logan.

Adams Families

Mark Adams is 36, a renowned defense attorney, and an ecstatically happy married man with two teenage sons and a baby daughter.
Bella Adams married Mark a year after Gordon died. She is now 36 and, after surgery to reverse her tubal ligation, is the proud mother of baby Emily.
Joseph Adams (JoJo) is 17, a senior in high school and All-American QB being recruited by several Division I colleges.
Logan Adams was adopted by Mark and **is a 16-year-old** junior and JoJo's leading receiver, although he's not interested in pursuing football. He's big-time into music, plays guitar, piano, and several other instruments and spends his downtime writing songs.

Joey Adams is 34 and heads up a covert Ameritech operation called Jason's Elite. He is happily married and the doting father of Sophia and Kelstyn, with another baby on the way.
Breez Adams is 31 and pregnant with her and Joey's third child. She is an accomplished and established artist.
Sophia Adams will be 3 in May and has her daddy wrapped around her finger.
Kelstyn Adams is 1.

Lee Families

Jason Lee is 55. Still madly in love with his wife, terribly protective of his daughter, and has taken Ameritech to a new level. He's begun working closely with governmental agencies in the US and several other countries.
Angel Lee is 52 and still an activist against domestic violence and runs the *Angel Foundation* housing women and children in peril. She and Shelley are loyal friends.
Kimberly (Kimmie) Lee is 23 and proving that she is very much her father's daughter, in that she's highly skilled and doesn't take crap off anyone. She is also very much her mother's daughter in that she likes to smart off.

Justin Lee is 63 and has started talking about retirement and turning the law firm over to Mark. He is Eric's oldest and dearest friend.
Lori Lee is 49. She dotes on the Kino/Adams/Lee families and is constantly giving of her time and energy wherever it is needed.

Davis Family
Jefferson (Jeff) Davis is 40 and is extremely happy to have his wife and two boys in his life. They visit his parents often. He was the one who recommended Jensen Deal (you'll meet him soon) as a sharpshooter for Ameritech.
MacKenzie (Mickey) Daley Davis just turned 39. She is still writing but spends much of her time taking care of her two rowdy boys.
Daniel Davis is 9, and recently recovered from a broken arm. He and his brother are still as rambunctious as ever.
Jeremy Davis is 8 and took complete advantage of his brother having been incapacitated.

East Coast Families
Nash/Smith Family
Toby Nash Smith is 52 and still a country heartthrob with his own record label. His parents remain in the glass house on the hill. His brother Ben, and sister Molly, are happy and healthy with families of their own.
Caroline Jones Smith is 50 and has taken some time off from running her dance schools and dance competition judging to spend quality time with her kids whom she says are growing up way too fast. She also takes time to stay in touch with her old friends from the diner where she used to work.
Grace Smith just turned 21 in Feb and is dancing, like her mom, and singing, like her dad, currently on Broadway.
Brody Smith is 18, a high school senior and being recruited to play Division I baseball.

Stewart Family
Chaz Stewart will be 46 next month, and still runs the ranch. His brother Tyler, now the Sheriff, married Jenny, a local girl. Sisters Cindy and Stephanie both married. His father and mother both retired and are truly enjoying their grandchildren.
Lisa Lewis Stewart is 43 and, along with partner Jodi, operates several Inns in smaller towns throughout Georgia. She still stays in touch with her truck-stop friends who helped her to get home. Her mother has never attempted to see her. Her father and step-mother and sister are doing fantastic!
Melaynah (Laynahbug) Stewart is 17, a high school junior (because her birthday is in November) and is a complete tomboy. She loves horses. She has designs on two things. One being Jacob Appel and two being an English teacher, though she has thought about taking over her father's ranch. She can ride and shoot like Annie Oakley.
Charles (Charlie) Stewart IV just turned 11 on February 11th and is extremely popular at school.
Matthew Stewart is 9 and wants to do everything his brother gets to do. He too loves to ride.
Aralyn Stewart is 4 and was a complete surprise to her parents. She is very much the opposite of Laynah. A gentle soul, ultra-feminine and quiet.

Appel Family
John Appel just turned 47. His string of martial arts schools is growing, and the schools have been endorsed by the Kino name. He has joined up with Brian, another old student

of Eric's who lives in Atlanta. The same Brian whose dojang Eric borrowed to train Shelley. Brian's wife, Meg, and sons Aaron, now 26, and Andrew 19, are all doing well.

Jodi Appel just turned 43 on Valentine's Day. She has been told by John Appel, Lisa Stewart, and Lizzy Tanner that she is their rock. She lives to be in service to others.
Jacob Appel is about to be 18 on 2/28 and is a senior in high school. Laynah Stewart has her eye on him, but he's set on joining the military like his father. Semper Fi!

Maddie Lewis is 84, has slimmed down, walks a mile every day, recently won a healthy cooking competition and has been a guest on several cooking shows.

Tanner Family
Keegan Tanner is 46 and has played an integral part in putting together Jason's Elite. He called upon his old special ops buddies, Brayden, Tristan and Kaleb who now work for Jason, to help train the "Elite." *Note - all three guys are now married with children.
Lizzy Anderson Tanner is 39 and is astounded to find out she's pregnant. She hasn't told Keegan yet because he has so much going on at Ameritech although she feels sure he'll be okay with it once the initial shock wears off.
Heather Anderson just turned 21 on Jan 10th. She is attending the University of Tennessee and is studying animal husbandry. She loves anything and everything to do with horses.
Rose and Violet Anderson were 20 on Christmas Day. Violet, a pianist, is studying music at Juilliard. Rose, always seeking a separate identity from her twin, is studying marine biology at the University of West Florida.
Daisy and Lily Anderson were 19 on Dec 19th. They are very close. They are both extremely athletic, enrolled in a local community college, and very much into boys, much to Keegan's dismay.
Gabriel Tanner is 14 and a football and baseball standout, even as a high school freshman. He loves to shoot, and excels in his martial arts classes with Master Appel.

Marissa Daley, little sister to Mickey and best friend of Jeffy Kino **is 26** and still in school in New York, determined to get her doctorate in psychology. She's had a few relationships sidetrack her and she is struggling a bit.

Cameron (Cam) Wallace is 27 and has been out of the picture since he broke up with Jeffy five years earlier.

Other Notes:

Tommy Crane remains incarcerated.

Robert Adams and his wife spend most of their time traveling between New York and San Francisco, keeping pace with the jet set.

Marion Daley, while still in a mental facility, became ill and died of pneumonia.

Beth's family, the Carters, have been active in JoJo's life. The Kinos made sure they had the ability to be at every event from birthdays to football games to black belt awards.

The Landow family, (the family of Bella's deceased first husband,) dropped their lawsuit against Bella and Gordon Landow's estate. They have attempted no contact with Logan.

The Stillwaters are still very much a part of Caroline's life. Their children, Paul and Lynn, are each married with children of their own.

"The only thing that gets in the way of my learning, is my education."

~ Albert Einstein ~

"And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy til I come."

Luke 19:13

Prologue

Late February, Present day
Kampala, Uganda

Scott watched from the shadows. She was so very beautiful standing there in her white evening gown, her dark curls piled on top of her head. She wore a delicate gold chain around her neck. It held a small simple golden cross that, at this moment, was lying against her heart, glistening in the torch light. He couldn't help but gaze at the dewy tan skin underneath that cross and imagined feeling her pulse, her life force. Shaking himself from the mental image, he drew a breath and watched.

Just looking at her, no one would think that this delicate-looking flower was a 5th degree black belt, a multi-year champion of the Kino Challenge and tough as nails, at least physically. Her emotional well-being was another story entirely, for Jeffy Kino was a tender-hearted young lady. Almost too compassionate, too kind, too giving, she saw the world through rose-colored glasses, though that just may be why she'd been able to accomplish so much. She believed that she could.

Scott turned his head to see a man in a tuxedo come to the terrace doors and gaze at the same beautiful sight. He relaxed slightly. The man, a co-worker and fellow doctor, was no danger to Jeffy, or as the world knew her, Dr. June Flower Kino.

❁

"What are you thinking about out here all alone, Dr. Kino?"

June Flower turned and offered a slight smile to her co-worker and friend, Dr. Richard Todd. She turned away again, gesturing out past the beautifully manicured lawn and gardens of the hotel, to the darkness of

the surrounding bush and finally the jungle.

"I was thinking that here we are all dressed up in fine clothes, eating exquisite foods, when only a few miles away in any given direction there are children who are sick or cold or hungry."

"Of course you were," Richard said. "You know you could say that and be correct if you were standing on the balcony of a hotel in the U.S., but I don't think anyone out there is cold right now." He tugged at his tie.

She laughed. "No, I guess not. The heat here at the moment is sweltering. Cold and hungry just go together when attempting to paint a miserable picture. Nonetheless, it just seems I should be out there helping right now."

"You are helping. Believe me, you're helping. You're the one all the dignitaries and celebrities came to hear speak tonight. It's your *Heal the World Foundation* that's made any of this possible. So they've pulled you away from camp for one day. I promise you, it will still be there when you get back. The world is awaiting your next word, heck, they await your next breath. Do you realize how many children and their families receive medical care and food because of the centers and camps you've set up all over this God-forsaken continent?"

She touched his arm. "Please don't say it like that. You make it sound so hopeless, and God has definitely not forsaken these people."

"Sorry, June. I didn't mean it like that. If anything, you've given them hope."

"It's not me. I'm only doing what God has called me to do. If their hope is in me it is sorely misplaced." She sighed and briefly closed her eyes.

"You must be tired. You put in a full day before you got all dressed up to come here. If you like, I can come to your tent and give you one of my special back rubs when we get back to camp tonight."

She eyed him, gave a soft chuckle. "Richard, I know what comes attached to one of those back rubs, as do several of the nurses and student volunteers in about a dozen clinics."

He grinned. "And so, what's wrong with that? You're a gorgeous, sexy woman. I'm a virile man. We both work very hard and give our all to the cause. We need a release. YOU need a release." He moved his fingers down her bare arm to her hand, lifted it and kissed her palm. "I can take care of you, June. I can give you what you need."

Smiling, Jeffy firmly pulled her hand away. "Richard, will you ever give up?"

"Never. Not where you're concerned."

"Why?" she asked, an amused lilt to her voice.

"Don't you know? You're the prize. The whole world is watching and waiting for June Flower's next trick."

She frowned. "I am *not* a show pony. I don't *do* tricks, and I don't do casual sex. You know that, so, Richard, if you can't stop pestering me, I suppose I'll have to arrange to have you transferred."

He covered his heart with his hand. "Ouch. Okay, okay, I'll stop. Just know, I'm here if you need me."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I'll keep that in mind."



Scott had to fight to keep himself from interfering with the conversation taking place. Even though Dr. Richard Todd wanted Jeffy, he was no threat to her safety and that was a priority. Jeffy's safety was of the utmost importance. She was HIS assignment, his mission, his life.

He and her family were not the only ones who valued the famous Dr. June Flower Kino. The entire world revered her, and with good reason. She'd found the cure for AIDS. She'd discovered it was not a naturally occurring virus. It was manmade, and she put an end to it. She'd annihilated lentiviruses and with that, the human immunodeficiency virus. A little over a year ago she'd been awarded the Nobel Prize in medicine.

Of course, being a Kino, she'd immediately turned the cash portion over to her father to invest. He recently gave her a quadrupled return, which, of course, was immediately donated to her foundation.

Now, the whole world eagerly turned a listening ear when Dr. Kino informed them that she'd uncovered a common basis for curing all diseases, and that is what she intended to do. Suddenly, it was realized that she could possibly have the power to change the entire course of humanity.

However, there were those in the world who were not too happy that this young, innocent, genius slip of a girl was on the verge of altering human life. Even though she claimed her progress was slow and her work had many years and a very long way to go, the dark forces of the world decided to put a halt to her work. Shortly after she'd won the Nobel Prize she'd had her eyes opened to the ugliness in the world by a string of unfortunate incidents.

In response, she'd disappeared from the public eye and when she finally did reappear, it was back in Africa, back where she'd spent many of her summers as a teenager and a full year at the age of twenty-one. She was going back, as she put it, to the basics. Back to humanity. Back to the reality of life in Africa to remember why she wanted to do the

research.

Her father had not been comfortable with her decision to spend time in Africa, especially since there had already been attempts on her life and being so far away made it more difficult to protect her, and so she'd been assigned two top agents from the acclaimed Ameritech Security as bodyguards. Each of those agents presently stood on either side of the terrace.

But Scott was an unknown, at least he was unknown to her. He was very much in contact with the two Ameritech agents and with her father. HE was a covert operative for Ameritech. One of a newly formed group, Jason's Elite, named after the owner of Ameritech, Jason Lee, and SCOTT was the secret weapon. HE had been trained solely for the purpose of ensuring June Flower Kino's safe return to the bosom of her family. They trusted him with her life which was a mouthful. They knew, however, that it was more than just a job for him. They knew he would give his all, his life, for June Flower Kino.

He watched her turn to smile at Dr. Todd. The doctor's hand skimmed her shoulder, ran down her arm. Scott's jaw clenched briefly before he took a breath and let it go. Dr. Todd was not the threat, he reminded himself. Jeffy could certainly hold her own against the likes of him. He glanced around as Mr. Ormandi, dressed in a muted version of the colorful Ugandan clothing, moved through the open terrace doors.

"Dr. Kino?" Mr. Ormandi said in his deep voice as he stepped out onto the terrace.

She raised her head, cocked an eyebrow.

"It's time, if you please."

He watched as Jeffy drew a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. She seemed apprehensive or nervous. He doubted she was nervous about speaking. Jeffy was never nervous about speaking. It was one of the things she did best. The apprehension may be because tonight they would test the waters. Jeffy would hint that she was about to once again be active in her research and see what kind of response they get. Because of her third sight, Jeffy's instincts were extremely good. He trusted them. So, if Jeffy was feeling apprehensive, he was on high alert.

Dr. Todd offered his arm. Gracefully, she hooked her arm in his and allowed him to lead her inside. Just as she got to the doors though, she turned her head sharply, as if she sensed his presence.

He moved farther back into the shadows between the wall and a potted rose. Her eyes scanned the terrace, her brow wrinkled. Shrugging it off, she turned and headed in to face the crowd.

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Romans 15:1
"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

Chapter One

Fifteen months earlier
Black Friday Galleria Mall, Newport Beach, CA

"Kimmie, you know how I hate to shop," Jeffy teased with a smile. "Ya know, if it was anyone else but you, I would've gone home hours ago."

Kimmie Lee laughed. "I know, I know, but I wanted to take you out to celebrate. Geez, I mean, you just got back from receiving the Nobel Prize. You deserve some new clothes, some new shoes, a decadent dessert."

Jeffy looked down at the 'Chocolate Molten Lava Cake' she'd been devouring at the very posh restaurant where Kimmie had insisted they dine for lunch, her treat, not that Jeffy cared who paid. Jeffy almost never ate sugar, so she was indeed being decadent, but Kimmie had a way of getting her to do things she wouldn't ordinarily do.

Kimmie had been her best friend, not an easy task, for as long as Jeffy could remember. Jeffy had been two when Kimberly Ann Lee had been born to Jason and Angel Lee. Angel was Jeffy's mother's best friend and so the two girls were together a lot. Even though Jeffy had an awkward childhood due to her high genius IQ, Kimmie had never given up on her. She'd been there for her, put up with her, always offering her positive vibrations.

Jeffy was grateful for Kimmie's friendship even though she hadn't always shown it. It had been difficult to relate when Kimmie was a freshman in high school and Jeffy was halfway through achieving her doctorate. It spoke well for Kimmie that she didn't let Jeffy's brain intimidate her. She seemed to understand Jeffy's need for normal friends. Well, either Kimmie understood or had been urged by her mother and father who probably explained that Jeffy needed to develop emotionally and socially as well.

All that aside, Kimmie was a riot. Always up. Always fun. Always a little crass, which Jeffy was sure she did on purpose for its entertainment value. Today, however, Jeffy suffered from jet lag mixed with post turkey day tryptophan overload. In other words, she was just plain exhausted. She smiled at her friend. "I know you mean well, Kim. You always mean well. But I'm done. Really."

"Okay, okay, I swear just one more store. It's just across the bay. A shop on that little bay pier where we used to walk in the summer. They're having a giant sale on all their silver and I just have to make that sale. I promise, it's the last stop and then we'll head home."

Jeffy heaved a weary sigh. "Okay, but if you go back on your promise I'm gonna grab an Uber and leave you."

"I swear. Last store." Kimmie signed the check and grabbed her purse. "Come on, Miss Smarty Pants, let's get going. What are you waiting for, huh? You're so slow."

Jeffy chuckled. "One of these days, Kimmie, I'm gonna put you on your butt."

"Oh yeah, Miss Kino, like I'm so sure. Just remember, sugar, I'm the current Kino Challenge Women's champion. When's the last time you trained?"

"I train every day, same as you," Jeffy answered. "Hmm, though I admit, not as hard as when I was fighting in the challenge. Okay, so, maybe we'd tie."

"Okay, I'm gonna let it go at a tie, since, after all, you did just cure the world of AIDS."

"Gee, thanks," Jeffy answered dryly.

"Hey, it's such a beautiful day, sunny, mid-seventies, let's put the top down."

"Whatever makes you happy, Kimmie."

She grinned. "Oh, well now, that's good to hear. Then we'll hit a few more stores."

"What?"

"Just kidding. Geez, Jeffy, you gotta lighten up."

"Sorry. Guess I really am tired."

They climbed into Kimmie's light pink Audi A5 and put the top down. She'd received the car as a gift from her parents on her last birthday. The front plates read "Princess" and that was an understatement.

"Play *Linkin Park*," Kimmie said, then added, "volume up," with a grin toward her friend. Jeffy leaned her head back and closed her eyes, seeking comfort in the warm rays of the sun as she listened to Kimmie

sing along with the music. She felt restless. Uncomfortable. She felt strongly that they needed to get home and she hoped everyone there was okay.

She squinted her eyes open briefly when they came to a stop. Traffic. Always traffic, but especially on Black Friday. Why anyone would purposely go out shopping on the day after Thanksgiving was beyond her. She had to smile at the thought, because after all, here she was, doing exactly that. They were inching along, stop and go and finally made the turn onto the roadway that was the Bay Bridge. Jeffy opened her eyes again, this time to glance at the water.

She found herself hypnotized by it, wondering if it was polluted, wondering how deep it was there only about a hundred yards or so from shore, wondering how cold it was. Mesmerized by the sun reflecting off the ripples, she breathed deeply and told herself to simply let go and practice some patience. She would be home soon enough. Still, if only the traffic would move!

She never heard the truck approach and screamed when it slammed into the driver's side of the car.

It seemed to Jeffy that everything was happening in slow motion. Kimmie's body buckled. Her head snapped sideways in the direction of the truck that rammed them and then back toward Jeffy as her side airbag deployed. Jeffy looked up at the truck, could see the driver's face. His eyes were narrowed in concentration, his jaw was tense, he gripped the steering wheel with both hands, and Jeffy realized he was still driving. The truck's engine roared as the driver gunned it. He was *trying* to ram them.

The car lifted up on its side. Kimmie screamed and Jeffy struggled to grab her while keeping her own head from slamming on the curb at the same time. The car jumped up on the small walkway and crashed through the bridge barriers.

Both she and Kimmie screamed again as they looked down into the dark water below, and then– Jeffy knew, this was it. This was the vision she'd had so many years ago. She and Kimmie in the water struggling to swim to the surface. It was gonna happen and there was nothing she could do about it. She looked over at her friend who was trying to climb out of her seat and possibly make it up and over the back of the car.

Jeffy tried to help her accomplish her goal. She pulled on Kimmie's arm to help her but the car lurched. They both screamed, and then they were airborne.

It seemed forever before the car impacted the water, even though it wasn't all that far down, because they'd barely started onto the bridge

portion of the roadway. Kimmie had already unbuckled her seat belt when she'd tried to get out of the car. Jeffy was anchored in her seat, so it was Kimmie who began floating upward during the fall. However, her body didn't have a chance to get clear of the car before they hit the water which they did simultaneously as the front airbags deployed.

The blast knocked Kimmie unconscious. Jeffy had to let go of Kimmie's hand in order to unbuckle her own seat belt which she gratefully was able to accomplish quickly.

The car sank rapidly. Jeffy dove with it, terrified she wouldn't be able to find Kimmie in the dark water. Jeffy began groping for her and was thankful when she grabbed a handful of Kimmie's long hair.

Jeffy pulled her friend close and began to swim to the surface. The water was cold and Jeffy's body felt sluggish. Kimmie seemed so very heavy. Jeffy paused for just a second and lost all the progress she'd made. She was a strong swimmer. They both were. Determined, she swam harder and harder still. She could see the light at the surface now. Her lungs felt as if they would explode. Just a little more.

There was much joy and relief when she finally broke the surface of the water and gulped in the warm air. The first thing she noticed was a line of heads peering over the edge of the bridge, many on their cell phones, so she knew help was on the way.

She turned and peered toward shore which was about the length of a football field away. She didn't know if she could make it. She could see a couple of men on the shore. They appeared to be stripping off their clothing, which meant they were intending to swim out to help. She was immediately grateful.

One arm wrapped around Kimmie, Jeffy floated on her back and used her free arm and her legs to propel them toward shore. Her teeth chattered and her body felt lethargic.

It seemed she'd fallen asleep or into some sort of trance, for when she heard the masculine voice it startled her.

"Okay now, sweetheart, let her go. We gotcha."

At first, Jeffy started to relinquish her hold on Kimmie, but then, she remembered—the driver of that truck had been intent. It almost seemed as if he'd been trying to push them off the bridge, as if he'd been trying to kill them. Why? How could that be?

They were pulling Kimmie from her grasp. She spun, ready to do battle, but the guys who'd swum out to help looked nothing like the man in the truck. They were young, possibly even teenagers.

"You can let go," one said again. "We're lifeguards."

Jeffy's eyes suddenly welled with tears. "Don't hurt her."

"I won't," the one who'd taken her said as he pulled away, Kimmie in tow.

"I think I can make it," Jeffy assured the one who'd remained beside her.

He smiled. "Okay. I'll just swim along beside you to make sure."

She nodded. "Thank you."

As it turned out, it was a good thing he did because she hadn't gone twenty yards before her traumatized body gave out.

He wrapped an arm around her and ordered her to relax before she drowned them both. He was proficient at his job. But by the time he pulled her to shore, she was shivering uncontrollably. Thankfully, emergency vehicles were already on the scene.

Jeffy stumbled ashore with the young man's help and was immediately surrounded by a couple of first responders.

"Kimmie. Where's Kimmie?" she asked.

"I'm right here," Kimmie yelled.

Jeffy spotted her. She was lying on the ground, a blanket wrapped around her. A paramedic was taking her blood pressure. Jeffy was so grateful that Kimmie was alive and conscious that she burst into tears.

"It's okay, now, hon," an EMT was saying. "You're gonna be okay. Come on, sit down right here."

Jeffy willingly sank to the ground. She drew a deep breath. "I, I n-need to call my family, and I need to s-speak with the p-police t-too," she said, her teeth chattering.

Someone wrapped a blanket around her. She glanced around trying to find the young men who'd rescued her and Kimmie from the water, worried that she wouldn't get to thank them. She found them though, speaking to the police and gesturing toward the bridge and water. Giving in to exhaustion, she lay back and closed her eyes.

"Is she okay?"

Jeffy opened her eyes at the question. A police officer stood nearby, speaking to the paramedic.

"She's in shock but I think she'll be okay," the medic said.

Jeffy looked up at the cop. "The d-driver, the t-truck who hit us, the driver, it seemed as if he did it on purpose."

The officer nodded. "That's pretty much what every witness is saying. He took off running once your car went over the bridge. We've sent patrol cars in the direction he went. Haven't turned up anything yet. There's a detective on the way who would like to speak to you. For now though, can I get your name?"

"Jeffy, I mean, June Flower. June Flower Kino."

The officer and the EMTs froze.

"Oh, man," one of them mumbled.

"*Doctor* Kino?" one of the paramedics asked.

"Y-yes. And I would like to call my f-father. D-do either of you have a phone I could use? I believe mine is at the b-bottom of the Pacific right now."

The officer pulled a phone from his pocket immediately. "And your friend's name?" he asked as he handed her the phone.

"That's K-kim Lee. You may have heard of her. She just f-fought in the Kino challenge a few weeks ago."

"Jason Lee's daughter?" the cop asked.

"That's her," Jeffy said, remembering Uncle Jason's relationship with law enforcement agencies was something he continuously honed because Ameritech Security consulted and contracted often with the government. She punched the numbers, pushed 'send.'

While Jeffy conversed with her father, the paramedic looked to the officer. "The Kino clan will be descending upon us shortly."

"Yeah, this could become a circus. I'd better let the captain know what's up," he said as he backed away.

Thirty minutes later there was no mistaking the large group of hard-bodies descending on the scene. It being the day after Thanksgiving, the entire family had been together at the Kino estate at the time of Jeffy's distressed phone call. June Flower's parents, Eric and Shelley Kino, though in their sixties, didn't look a day over forty-five. Other than the graying hair, and a few laugh lines, there was nothing to give away their age.

Pulling up at the same time as Jeffy's parents were her half-brother and half-sister, martial arts movie legend Ricky Kino and three-time Oscar-winning actress, Breanna Adams who were married to each other. Also getting out of that car was one of their two children, Taylor Kino, a twelve-year-old absolutely breathtaking beauty if ever there was one.

Korean-born Jason Lee and his very American blonde wife Angel, Kimmie Lee's parents, jumped from the car behind. Jason's face appeared devoid of emotion while Angel's was etched with worry. Also from that car came Kim's uncle and aunt, Justin and Lori Lee. Justin was much closer to Eric's age than his brother Jason, and had been Eric's best friend since high school.

The last vehicle unloaded. June Flower's other half-brothers, Mark Adams, an attorney, and Joey Adams, Ameritech Security's top agent, both crosses between a young Mark Wahlberg and Ryan Phillippe. They moved quickly down the hill followed by three tough-looking teen boys,

Jeffy's nephews, JoJo and Logan Adams, Mark and Bella's sons, and their cousin, Eric Kino III, who was the son of Ricky and Bree.

The three teens were pretty much inseparable. They'd been recently featured in two different teen magazines because of a music video they'd made of a few of their jam sessions and marketed to raise money for their aunt's foundation. One headline read, *Hot guys- Hot music- Hot cause- A Hot Combination.* Unfortunately, the only one of the three interested in continuing in the music industry was Logan.

Mark's and Joey's wives, both close to giving birth, had stayed behind at the house.

Detective Hunter eyed the group of celebrities as they made their way down the embankment. It was a paparazzi's heaven. Thank goodness they'd been able to keep the identity of the car crash victims under wraps for now. However, with the choppers circling overhead, their cameras would soon identify the famous group of people joining them. Hopefully, the Kino family would all be gone by the time the crowd got out of control.

Both Jeffy and Kimmie were immediately swept up in the arms of their families as their parents and siblings assured themselves the young women were healthy and safe.

Next, members of the family spoke with the two young lifeguards who hadn't hesitated to offer their assistance. After the young men told what they knew, they were thanked profusely. They would eventually receive great recognition.

Once Jason heard the story of what had transpired, he took Joey and Ricky with him up to the bridge and did his own examination of the truck that had rammed his daughter's car. By the time he returned, it had been determined that the girls would not be transported to the hospital for observation, assured that if Kimmie showed any ill effects from being knocked out, Dr. Kino would be in attendance.

While the cops waited for the equipment to arrive that would retrieve Kimmie's car from the bay, the family loaded everyone up into their vehicles and, before the paparazzi could descend like vultures, the Kino, Adams and Lee families were gone.

❁

The next day, Jeffy banged around the kitchen as she prepared turkey sandwiches for Kimmie and herself. Kimmie had spent the night so that Jeffy could monitor her and was now outside on the beach relaxing and reveling in the warmth of the noonday sun.

All night and all morning Jeffy's mind had been going a mile a

minute. It had finally happened. The vision she'd had nine years earlier had finally come to pass. It had never been particularly clear. In the vision, Jeffy had seen Kimmie in the water and they had struggled together to the surface. It was a relief to have it over with. It'd been hanging over her head for so long. Now, it was over and Kimmie had survived, thank God.

Jeffy had never really understood the visions. She'd had them numerous times over the years concerning numerous subjects and numerous people. Sometimes it'd seemed like they were a warning that some ill wind boded. Other times they'd seemed like road signs, little coincidences or synchronicities that came upon her like deja vu, letting her know she was still on the right path.

She didn't understand them because it seemed as if there was no rhyme or reason. What good is a warning if it comes only a few seconds beforehand, giving no time to intervene? And yet, sometimes, the warning was in plenty of time but not clear enough to understand.

The vision concerning Kimmie had been coming for years and seemed plenty clear. Kimmie would drown or come close to drowning and Jeffy would be able to save her or drown with her. It was a relief to finally have it over and done with. Now, after the dream Jeffy had last night, she understood that the vision hadn't come to keep it from happening. Instead it was meant as a sign that something significant had happened. A corner had been turned. A road sign.

Bearing complete responsibility for what happened on the bridge, Jeffy had offered to cater sandwiches down to the beach. As she worked alone in the kitchen, she took time to go over the decision she'd made. She was leaving.

She'd come to the decision early this morning after she'd awakened from a dream she'd had in the early dawn hours. In the dream, she'd walked along a path of light. On either side of her lay treacherous dangers. As she walked she saw before her the re-enactment of the vision of Kimmie and herself in the water finally swimming to safety. It was like watching a movie inside of her dream. Then suddenly, a light appeared in front of her which grew brighter and brighter until a man appeared.

He looked very similar to her father–like a Native American warrior, and he smiled in a sad sort of way and said, "It has begun."

What 'it' was, Jeffy really didn't know for sure, yet instinctively, she knew that it had to do with her research and with dark forces that would pit themselves against her. She also knew it was important, or, why would she have a vision almost ten years ago to foretell of a happening

that was simply a road sign, a mark on the calendar.

She hadn't yet had a chance to speak to her mother and father about the dream and her feelings about it, but she was hoping to do so before today's meeting. As had become the usual, when the security or well-being of anyone in the family was threatened, a meeting was called to discuss precautions. That meeting was scheduled to take place in a few hours.

Jeffy cut three sandwiches into triangles and arranged them on a plate then searched through the fridge for olives and pickles.

"Man, those sandwiches look perfect."

Jeffy looked up, closed the refrigerator, eyeing her half-brother and the man standing with him. "Hands off, Joey." She placed the jars on the counter.

"Come on, Jeffy, surely you're not gonna eat all that," Joey complained.

Jeffy eyed thirty-four-year old Joey. He was the top agent for Ameritech and slated to one day take over the company when Jason retired. With light brown hair, big brown eyes, slight dimples and a rock hard body, Joey was a heartthrob, though he was no longer available. Four years ago he'd married the beautiful Breez Sheridan. They had little Sophia a year and a half ago and were expecting another girl in about four weeks.

The man standing next to Joey was also an Ameritech agent, Jensen Deal. He was what Kimmie described as—beautiful. Gorgeous bod, gorgeous face, gorgeous smile. His skin was the color of rich dark caramel due to his father's black heritage and his eyes were a soft green due to his Irish mother. He was a new recruit, young and unseasoned, but promising due to his marksmanship *and* his uncanny abilities involving computers. To say he could pretty much hack into anything was an understatement. Jeffy found him interesting.

She grinned at Joey. "I *could* eat it all, but I won't. I'm sharing with Kimmie."

"Kimmie is here?" Jensen asked.

Jeffy nodded slyly. "Yes, Kimmie is here." She glanced at Joey. "So, what are you doing here? The meeting isn't for a few hours."

"Agent Deal and I had a consult with a client not too far away and I invited him here for lunch."

"Well, you're on your own. Mom and Angel are in the TV room supposedly going over some Christmas plans and Dad and Jason went down to the police station to inspect Kimmie's car. They should be back soon, though."

Joey sighed and then shrugged. "No problem. I can find my way around a kitchen."

"I know you can," she agreed. "So do it and stop trying to filch my sandwiches."

"Uh, where's Kimmie?" Jensen asked.

Jeffy smiled at his transparency, nodded toward the large glass dining room doors that led out to the giant deck which led down to the beach. The electric sliding doors were slightly open and one of the white thin sheer curtains blew back gently in the breeze. "She's on the beach trying to recoup after yesterday's ordeal."

"Is she okay? I mean, after yesterday?"

"She's fine." Jeffy grinned. "I am too."

"Oh, yeah, I was gonna ask about you too," he stammered.

"Sure you were," Jeffy laughed.

Just as Jeffy finished speaking, Joey heard a strangled sound, like a scream that had been cut short. He moved toward the sound, looked out the kitchen window and reacted immediately. Three men had thrown a blanket over whom he presumed to be Kimmie and were lifting her.

He pulled his weapon, spoke quickly. "Jeffy, as soon as we get outside close and lock the door and go to the TV room with Mom. Lock the door. Do not come out. Do you understand?"

She wanted to argue, but the urgency in his voice forbade it. Instead she nodded.

Joey took off full speed out the dining room door. Jensen was right behind. Jeffy did as she was told.

Joey could see that the three men were headed toward a speed boat that was pulled up on the sand a couple hundred yards away. Kimmie was kicking and screaming but it seemed her efforts did nothing to slow her captors.

Fearful the kidnappers would get to the boat before Joey could catch them he yelled to gain their attention. "Stop!"

The men did, just long enough to swing their weapons toward Joey and Jensen and fire. Both men dove and came up, wary of returning fire while Kimmie was in the way, yet, if they didn't stop them, the kidnappers would be gone with her. Joey made a quick decision.

"Shoot," Joey yelled at Jensen. The young agent's marksmanship skills were comparable to Agent Jeff Davis and Joey was depending on them now.

Jensen stopped, aimed and pulled the trigger. The man holding Kimmie fell, dumping his bundle on the ground.

The two remaining men froze with their weapons trained on Joey and

Jensen, who kept their own guns trained steadily back.

Taking advantage of the standoff, Joey slowly edged closer, holding his weapon steady. "Kimmie," he called.

She was battling to get out from under the blanket she'd been rolled up in. Joey moved forward and the two men backed up. The wounded man crawled on his belly trying to get to the boat, leaving a trail of blood on the sand.

Joey approached Kimmie, grabbed the blanket and snatched it away from her. "Run, Kimmie. Now! Get to the house," Joey yelled.

"No!" she argued.

To his utter surprise and dismay, she turned and ran right at one of her would-be captors.

Jensen, who'd been just about to squeeze off a warning shot to keep the men from fleeing held up just in time.

Kimmie swung at the man closest to her and connected.

"Back off, Kim," Jensen barked as he held his weapon aimed at the other man.

"No," she yelled back.

She swung again but this time the man retaliated and backhanded her, sending her flying to the ground.

Joey muttered an obscenity. Knowing Jensen would cover him, he holstered his weapon, moved forward, grabbed Kim around the waist and pulled her kicking and screaming away from the scene.

About that time one fired at Jensen and sent him diving to avoid getting shot. By the time he recovered, the two men standing had collected their wounded companion and made it to the boat. In between avoiding a hail of gunfire, Jensen squeezed off several shots, pretty sure he hit at least one of his targets in the boat. Within seconds, the boat shot across the water and was out of sight.

His expression thunderous, Jensen turned to join Joey, yet his eyes were zeroed in on the girl next to him. He marched right up, grabbed Kimmie by the arm and jerked her hard, practically dragging her in his wake as he moved toward the house.

Jeffy, her mom Shelley, and Kimmie's mom Angel, stood by the glass doors and opened them quickly. Jensen stormed past them, still dragging Kimmie by the arm. Jeffy, Shelley and Angel looked on with wide eyes and gaping mouths, as he suddenly stopped, grabbed Kimmie by both shoulders and shook her.

"Are you out of your mind? Are you trying to get yourself killed? I swear I ought to turn you over my knee and wallop you good," he said as he gave her another hard shake.

"You'd better have a very good reason for what you're doing, Agent Deal."

Jensen looked up, startled by the deep voice. He'd been so intent on his actions he hadn't heard Jason come in. He looked up now to see him, Jason Lee, his boss, Kimmie's father, standing next to Grandmaster Kino, both appearing extremely calm, which was usually not a good sign. It finally dawned on Jensen that he'd been caught mistreating the boss' daughter– the boss, who'd once trained the US military special operatives and whose reputation included adjectives like 'deadly,' 'lethal,' and 'vicious.' Jensen quickly released Kim and stood at attention. "Uh, yes sir. I mean, sorry sir, but yes sir, I have a good reason."

"Hah!" Kimmie said loudly as she rubbed her arms, her face red with the anger she felt.

Jason didn't speak. He merely raised a brow as he patiently waited for the explanation.

Joey did his best to suppress a smile, as did Eric, Shelley and Jeffy. Even Kimmie's mom, Angel, seemed to be smiling.

"She—" he stopped, ran a hand over his face as he tried to gather himself. "She messed everything up and put herself in danger."

When Jason still didn't speak, Joey decided to step in and help Jensen out. "Three men tried to kidnap Kimmie off the beach. They threw a blanket over her and tried to carry her to a speed boat they had waiting. Thanks to Jensen we were able to take down one guy, maybe two, and get to her. I told her to run back to the house and—"

"And the little hellion refused and ran right back at the guy," Jensen spat.

"That's right, I did," Kimmie said loudly and proudly. "And I got a lick in too!"

"Damn it, girl, they had guns. You could've gotten yourself killed. As it is, you almost got me killed and because you refused to do what you were told the bad guys got away! You've probably never had a spanking in your life and..." He stopped, realizing he was insulting her parents. He lost some of his self-assuredness as Jason's eyes narrowed.

"And so, you think she's had no discipline and you decided to take it upon yourself," Jason finished for him.

Jensen stood straight, nodded. "Yes sir, I, uh, I guess that's what I did."

Jason turned toward his daughter. "You and I have some things to discuss. Go to Eric's study and wait for me there."

Her eyes opened wide. "But—"

"Don't 'but' me, young lady. Just go."

"I am not a child."

"No, you're not, though sometimes you act like one."

She drew in a breath to respond, but stopped when he held his hand up.

"As your father, whom you supposedly love and respect, I'm asking you to go into Eric's study and think over your actions. I will join you soon."

She looked into his eyes then glanced at her mother, who gave a slight nod. She turned to glare at Jensen who gave her a cocky sneer. Growling, she turned and left.

Jason waited for her to leave then turned back to Jensen. "I'm gonna say this only once. You ever lay your hands on my daughter again and I'll beat you to a bloody pulp."

Jensen swallowed. Nodded. "Yes sir." He glanced at Kim's mother and was confused by her smile and wink.

"On another note," Jason continued. "I appreciate your passionate concern for my daughter's safety. Both you and Joey have my gratitude for your quick thinking, quick actions, and for risking your lives to help Kimmie."

"Why would anyone want to kidnap our daughter?" Angel asked.

Grandmaster Kino finally spoke. "They didn't," Eric said, his eyes meeting Jeffy's. "They thought Kimmie was Jeffy. It's Jeffy they were after yesterday and Jeffy they were after today. The girls are similar in appearance. Kimmie is a little smaller, but only a little. They both have dark hair and—"

"But Kimmie's is stick straight and Jeffy's is curly," Angel said.

"Men wouldn't think about that," Jason said. "They are extremely similar in appearance. Hair color, eye color. Kimmie is more Asian looking while Jeffy's Asian heritage is not quite as evident, still, it would be an easy mistake to make. Especially since she was sitting alone on the beach outside Jeffy's home."

"So why the attempt on Jeffy's life?" Angel asked.

"We'll discuss that in the meeting today," Eric said.

"Mom, Dad," Jeffy began. "I need to speak with you before we have that meeting."

Eric nodded, looked to Shelley. "Let's go upstairs to our room," he offered.

Joey watched his mother, step-father and sister as they made their way toward the stairs. Something was up and he had a feeling it wasn't good.

Meantime, Jason turned back to Agent Deal. "Before I go in to speak

with my daughter I'm gonna give you a few minutes to go in there and apologize to her."

Jensen nodded gratefully.

"I suggest you make it good," Jason added. He turned to Joey. "Let's go gather shell casings and anything else we can find."



When the door to the study opened, Kimmie whirled from where she stood by the window. Immediately her face darkened. "You!" she snarled.

Jensen smiled at her. "Yes, me," he said softly, his eyes taking in her long, disheveled hair, part of it still up in the ponytail, and part hanging in her face. He looked lower, to her tight body, which was accentuated by the form-fitting, black pants and the matching sports bra. In addition, she wore a fierce expression which he was not intimidated by at all. "I'm supposed to apologize," he admitted.

She raised her chin. "Then do it."

His mouth tightened into a grim line. "I'd like to, if just to appease your father, but I can't."

She moved toward him but stopped when she got to Eric's desk. Leaning against the desk, she crossed her arms over her chest. "And why not? Am I not worthy of one of your apologies?"

"Of course you are, yet how can I apologize for being upset that you put yourself in danger? Do you understand that if anything happened to you, Kim Lee, my life would be over." Jensen sighed, moved closer. "Okay, I admit, I got a little carried away, but dammit, Kim, you scared me. You really scared me."

She smiled. "Big old you scared by little old me? Now, that's totally hot."

He rolled his eyes. "And that's totally childish."

She shrugged. "It is what it is. Besides, you're only a few years older than me."

"Three years older in years, babe, but decades older in other ways, Kim. Look, I am sorry, I mean, if I was a little rough with you. I'll do my best to keep my fear for your safety in check, but you have to promise me you won't ever put yourself in danger like that again."

She heaved a dramatic sigh. "Okay, so I guess I let my temper get away from me. But that guy pissed me off."

"I get that, but Kim, if you wanted to go a round or two with him, you could've given me a chance to catch him and like, unarm him."

She grinned. "Liar. You are such a liar. You would never have

accommodated me that way."

He smiled, moved closer, grabbed her by the waist and lifted her onto the edge of the desk. "Okay, maybe not, but I'll accommodate you other ways."

She ran her hands over his bulging triceps. "Really? How?" she teased, as she raised her arms and locked her fingers behind his neck.

He skimmed his hands up her sides, cupped her face. "Kim, you know you make me crazy."

She smiled sweetly. "That was my intention."

Groaning, he bent his head, kissed her fiercely.

She leaned against him. "Jensen," she whispered. "It's such a relief when I'm close to you."

"We can be close all the time when—"

"When?"

"When you've told your father about me."

"You know I can't do that. Not yet. He won't be happy I'm in love with one of his agents. He'll probably go freako on me. No, I don't want either one of my parents to know yet."

"I think your mom already knows, or at least suspects. Maybe she can talk to your father for you."

Kim shook her head. "No. I'm not ready to handle it. I have to think of a way to work it. My father is a complicated man."

"Still, he's a man who loves his daughter. Wouldn't he want you to be happy?"

"Yes, of course he would, but he has rules that he strictly adheres to and one of the main ones is I am not supposed to interact with the men who work for him."

"Kim, if you're afraid to talk to him then I'll do it. Let me go to him, speak to him, man to man."

"Please, Jensen," she whispered, leaning forward to kiss him. "Let me do things my way."

She pulled his head down for another kiss and at the same time, took his hand in hers. At first, he tried to pull away, but she held him tight. He finally gave in and pressed her back on the desk.

He pulled away for just a second, looked down at her sweet face, her eyes darkened with passion and he lost it. He kissed her again, roughly, fiercely. She gasped, her hands reaching out. Something fell off the desk and landed with a giant thud. A second later, the study door flew open.

Jason's body filled the threshold, just behind stood Joey and behind Joey was Angel. Jensen cursed and quickly backed away from Kimmie who squealed and bolted upright.

Jason surged forward. Reacting quickly, Joey threw his arms around Jason's neck, locked his wrists and held on for dear life as if he were wrestling a bear. "Wait, Jason. Hold on now. Don't do anything you'll regret later," Joey said loudly.

"I'm gonna kill him," Jason muttered.

"No, Daddy!" "No, Jason!" Both Kimmie and Angel screamed at the same time.

Jensen stood tall, waited for the first blow.

Joey decided the only solution was to engage Jason in battle. He threw punches which Jason blocked easily. Jason threw punches which fortunately, Joey also blocked easily. Jason then threw Joey, who landed against a chair, sending both him and the chair tumbling across the floor.

"That's enough."

Everyone in the room stopped at the quiet voice. They turned to see Eric standing in the doorway. He moved into the room.

"Joey? You okay?"

Joey stood, righted the chair. "Of course. Uncle Jason wouldn't hurt me." He rubbed his shoulder. "Well, he wouldn't hurt me bad."

Eric eyed Jason. "No, he wouldn't." He looked at Agent Deal. "Nor would he hurt you. If he'd wanted to, you'd both be laid out." He glanced around the room, saw his thick lead crystal paperweight lying beside the desk. He smiled, spoke to Jason in Korean who quickly answered him in the same language.

Eric nodded and looked to Kim whose face had gone red. "Joey, thank you for your intervention and quick thinking. You're dismissed. Kim, Agent Deal, Jason, Angel, I invite you to find a seat and we'll take a few minutes to work this out. How does that sound?"

Quietly, they each found a chair.

❁

High school junior, Joseph Adams, known as JoJo by his friends and family, was the quarterback for his football team. Currently, he drove his brand new Ford F-150 carefully down the highway. He'd worked hard for three years to earn the money to be able to buy it by the time he hit his sixteenth birthday. His father had matched him dollar for dollar as a reward for the hard work and the good grades.

His friends had teased him about coming from a rich and famous family and yet having to work to buy his own vehicle, but he felt much better about working for it than having it handed to him on a silver platter. Besides, he'd argued, it wasn't his father who was the famous

one. It was his Uncle Ricky and Aunt Bree, and to a lesser extent, his Uncle Joey and maybe his grandparents.

His own father, Mark Adams, had been an all-star, all-American, Heisman candidate quarterback, but he'd been injured and went on to study law. He was now a big deal attorney in line to be a partner with the law firm of Lee, Baker and Todd. JoJo's friends had reminded him though, that his father, a 6th degree black belt, had won a Kino Challenge and that made him plenty famous.

JoJo's mother had died right after he'd been born. JoJo was almost thirteen when his father finally married, bringing JoJo a step-brother whom he loved every bit as much as any real brother could. Logan and his mother, Bella Landow, had been kept prisoner by an abusive father and husband, Gordon Landow. The man had been shot and killed by Logan in order to save his mother's life. It had been a happy day when all the drama was over and Bella had come to be JoJo's mother, and Logan to be his brother. As families go, a happier one would be hard to find. Or a more grateful one.

"Yo, Jo, you think you can drive any slower?" Logan asked from his place in the passenger seat. "The meeting is at one."

JoJo smiled over at Logan, glanced at the digital time readout. "We have time, bro. Just cruisin', ya know, enjoying the ride."

"Guess I don't blame you. I can't wait for *my* birthday, and my car, though I haven't saved up as much as you did."

"Better get to work," JoJo laughed as they pulled into the school parking lot and swung around to the side of the gym.

There were no other cars in the lot and Logan frowned. "JoJo, are you sure they changed the time to 1:00? I mean, obviously, no one else is here."

JoJo pulled out his cell phone and pulled up the text message from Coach Williams. It definitely said the time for the Saturday football meeting had been changed from 5:00 to 1:00. He showed the text to Logan.

Logan shrugged. "I guess everyone is running late. You can toss me a few before everyone else gets here," Logan suggested as he opened the door and got out.

JoJo nodded, got out of the truck and poked his head into the back seat to pull out a football. He didn't look up when he heard tires screeching up behind his truck because he figured it was one of his teammates acting a fool. He figured wrong.

He straightened up, ball in hand and drew in a sharp breath. He felt the cold metal of a gun pressed to his temple at the same time he saw

Logan in a headlock, a gun pressed to *his* head. His brother's eyes met his, searching as if JoJo would know how to get out of the situation. Unfortunately, JoJo was as stunned as his brother. He blinked, saying the only thing that came to mind. "Stay calm, Logan."

The man behind JoJo spoke. "Good advice. You're gonna walk to the van and get in and don't think about trying any of your karate crap or little brother dies."

JoJo intended to do everything the man said so he was surprised when the guy pulled back and pistol-whipped him. Confusion was a fleeting thought as he sank into unconsciousness.

It seemed only a second later when his eyes blinked open. He looked around. It appeared they were in an old convenience store. The shelves were empty, the ceiling tiles falling down. His wrists were bound by zip ties. He heard a moan and realized his brother was right next to him.

"Logan, you okay?" JoJo asked.

"I dunno. I think my arm is broken and I'd be better if he'd stop kicking me."

JoJo scooted around to get a better view of what was taking place. He counted four large men, all armed. Two by the door of the abandoned building. One standing to his right, leaning over Logan, a big smile on his face. One standing to JoJo's left. He looked up at him. "Why are you guys doing this?"

"We're sending a message to your auntie."

"Uh, which one?"

"Dr. Kino."

"If you wanted to send her a message you could've just called her. Though, I guess if she doesn't recognize your number she might ignore the call."

"Yeah, well, we're about to send a different kind of message. One she can't ignore."

JoJo swallowed. He glanced at Logan whose pained expression showed he too understood what was about to happen.

The man standing over Logan grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him up to his feet. He pulled a knife and pushed the switch. "X marks the spot, kid. Tell your aunt to stop." He touched the knife to Logan's chest.

"Wait! Wait!" JoJo begged. "Come on, he's a kid."

The man laughed. "And what are you?"

"I'm a little older, anyway. Please." When it didn't appear they were gonna listen to him, he tried a different tactic. "You guys don't have any honor. It's easy to beat up on a kid. Especially one whose hands are tied."

JoJo gestured around. "Four big guys, come on. I challenge you. Untie my hands and take me on. Just leave him alone."

"Well, it don't work that way. We were told to go after the younger Kino cuz that's the one that hurts the most."

"Well, then you guys are all messed up because first, we aren't even Kinos."

"Dr. Kino is your aunt, correct?"

JoJo thought. What he was about to say would hurt Logan, but it might save him. "Yeah, she's MY aunt. Logan is adopted. He's not blood related to Dr. Kino in any way. But I am. Come on, undo my hands and let's have at it."

"Don't listen to him. He's lying," Logan said.

"Shut up," the guy holding Logan shoved him back down and kicked him again.

JoJo felt his ploy might be working. "You guys scared? I don't blame you really."

"No one is scared of you."

"Okay, I get that. That's why you came after us to deliver the message. Easy targets. So, if I'm so easy, take off these zip ties and take me on. But you won't cuz deep down, you're a little afraid I'd come out on top."

"You Kinos think you're so high and mighty."

"Only because we are," JoJo prodded. "You think so too or you'd do what I ask."

The guy standing over JoJo nodded at the one who'd been kicking Logan. "Undo his hands."

The two guys at the door turned with big smiles on their faces. JoJo was pulled to his feet. His ties cut. He quickly tried to decide how he would start. The guy he'd challenged walked toward the middle of the store, motioned at JoJo.

"Come on you little brat. Come get your medicine."

JoJo moved forward slowly. The guy was definitely bigger than him, but probably a lot slower. They circled each other a few steps. JoJo sprang into action and immediately swept the man's legs, taking him down, and then JoJo quickly landed on him and bashed his nose with an elbow. The guy screamed, grabbing his face. JoJo was sure the nose was broken because that was exactly what he'd been trying to do. His next step would have been to crush the man's throat, but the other three guys were on him in a second.

They beat him to a pulp, then tore his shirt from his body and held him while the guy, whose nose he'd broken, came forward with a knife

and cut into JoJo's chest. JoJo couldn't suppress the cry that came from his throat before he blacked out.

"We gotta go. Get them into the van," broken nose ordered.

❁

"It was hilarious," Joey continued as he scooped up another bite of leftover pumpkin pie. "Except when he threw me across the room." He rubbed his shoulder. "I've never seen Jason so out of control. It reminded me of Eric when he caught Cameron in the woods with Jeffy. You know, that 'not *my* little girl' phenomena."

Mark, Ricky and Justin chuckled.

"Man, I wish I'd been here to see it," Ricky said from where he stood near the kitchen counter, munching on carrot and celery sticks.

"If only I could reenact the scene," Joey said with a laugh. "He literally like, morphed into the Hulk." Joey began making monster noises and the men broke into laughter.

Their laughter came to an abrupt halt as the one they spoke of entered the kitchen. Jason stopped, looked around, noticing the effort of each man to keep a smile from his face. He rolled his eyes. "Fine. Laugh." He turned to Joey. "But just you wait about ten years when your little Sophia turns twelve. You'll understand then."

Joey frowned.

Jason pointed at Mark, Joey's elder brother by two years. "And don't you and Joey both have little girls about to arrive any day? Better be careful what you say, kiddos. Karma, ya know?"

"Daddy, daddy," Sophia cried.

Right on cue, Joey's tiny one-and-a-half-year-old daughter came running into the kitchen.

Joey stood and scooped her up into the air above his head. "Phia, Phia," he mocked back at her. "Who's got you now, huh?"

Sophia giggled. "I fwy, Daddy!"

Joey held her high over his head, her shrieks of pleasure warming their way into everyone's heart. He brought her down low enough to nibble on her neck just so he could make her do that belly-laugh thing that he loved so much. When he finally stopped, she snuggled up against his chest.

"Daddy, I wanna cookie," she said.

"It's almost time for dinner," Joey countered. "You'll have to wait until after you eat."

Her chin quivered and her lips trembled as she suddenly sniffed. "Gandma say I have a cookie," she wailed.

He drew a deep breath. "Okay, okay. Don't cry for goodness sake. I'll

get you a cookie." He grabbed a cookie off the plate on the counter and handed it to her.

Her smile lit up the room. "Tank ooo, Daddy," she said, hugging his neck, the threatening tears magically disappearing.

He set her down and patted her bottom. "Whatever, you little monster. Go tell all the ladies that it's almost time for our meeting."

The adorable child with her mother's big blue eyes and soft, dark hair ran out of the kitchen, her feet pounding the floor as if she weighed hundreds of pounds instead of twenty. Joey smiled after her, then turned back toward the others.

Mark, Justin, Jason, and Ricky were all grinning at him.

"What?" Joey asked, but then immediately realized they were making fun of the way his tiny daughter had just manipulated him. "Isn't it time for the meeting?" he asked as he moved toward the door. "And all of you can kiss my butt," he added. The room burst into laughter behind him.

The men made their way into the giant great room which many people who visited said looked more like a hotel lobby than a living room. Three extra-large sofas formed a U-shape conversation area. Other chairs from around the room and a few from the dining room had been brought in for the meeting.

"Uncle Mark, where's JoJo and Logan?" Ricky's almost sixteen-year-old son, Eric, asked as they entered the room.

Mark glanced at his watch. "They had a football meeting. They should be here any minute."

Frowning and antsy, young Eric moved toward the front window and gazed out.

In the time it took for the men to move from the kitchen to the living room, their moods had changed from jovial to dead serious. The subject at hand, Jeffy's safety. Each was hoping that all their preparations would be adequate. They looked up as the women came into the room.

Shelley led the way, her warm, gentle eyes looking as if they'd just had a good cry. Mark eyed Joey, acknowledging that they both noticed. Their mother was a beautiful woman. She wore her hair a tad bit shorter now, her curls just past her shoulders. Sometime over the last ten years, the golden brown had added a few streaks of gray, but on her it was beautiful. She had the body of an athlete, the smile of an angel, and was the most loving, compassionate woman they'd ever known. She was wringing her hands which wasn't a great sign.

Angel and Kimmie entered, and Jason smiled at his wife, blond and tan and the "babe" she'd always been. His daughter caught his eye and smiled tentatively at him and he tried to not remember seeing her laid back over

Eric's desk with his agent, Jensen Deal's mouth on hers just a few hours ago. It wasn't working. He drew a deep cleansing breath and focused instead on the fact that she could be missing or worse right now if not for Joey and Agent Deal.

The newest members of the family were next. Bella and Breez, each holding one of little Sophia's hands. Bella and Breez were sisters who'd married Mark and Joey, respectively. Both beauties had black hair and blue eyes and both were eight months pregnant, both with girls. Little Sophia was Joey and Breez's much-adored and perfectly spoiled firstborn.

Ricky smiled at his wife, Bree, as she entered the room, happy and amazed that he still felt mesmerized by her after all these years. They'd been married for sixteen years, but he'd been in love with her closer to twenty-five. Next to her walked his daughter, Taylor, who looked incredibly like his half-sister, Jeffy, which was only logical because Ricky's father married Bree's mother and they had Jeffy. He, being Eric's son and Bree being Shelley's daughter, of course their daughter would look like Jeffy.

Lori Lee brought up the rear. She was married to Justin Lee and usually pretty quiet, unless something riled her, like a threat to her family. At present, one could say she was fairly riled.

Everyone was sitting and quietly chatting when Eric and Jeffy entered the room. They remained standing, Jeffy looking sad, the complete opposite of her usual demeanor and Eric looking resolute. Jeffy put a hand to her head. Moaned.

"You okay, sweetie?" Eric asked.

"I'm not sure. Not feeling well. Something is wrong."

"Another vision or premonition?"

"Maybe. Let's get this meeting over quickly please."

Eric nodded. His calm voice demanded immediate silence. "I want to thank everyone for rearranging their schedules," he began.

"No need to thank anyone," Ricky said quickly. "We're family. We'll do what needs to be done to protect our own."

Eric nodded. "I appreciate that. As always, let's begin with a prayer. Shelley? Will you do the honors?"

Shelley bowed her head and gave thanks, asked for clarity and peace of mind, in Jesus' name.

"Thank you, sweetheart. Now, just so we're all on the same page, let me explain that I believe, as does Shelley and several others, that Jeffy's life is being threatened. We believe that the truck hitting the girls and pushing them over the bridge was not an accident. The police and Jason concur. We also believe that what happened to Kimmie on the beach earlier today was

a case of mistaken identity. Kimmie and Jeffy have a similar look about them. They thought it was Jeffy out there and they tried to take her. What they had planned for her, we don't know because they were able to get away." His eyes only briefly swept Kimmie, but she felt the sting.

Sighing, Jason shook his head.

"It's okay, Kimmie," Jeffy interjected trying to save her friend. "I would've done the same thing."

"Sorry squirt," Joey put in immediately. "It is definitely *not* okay."

Eric raised his hand. "Okay guys, moving on. Again, we made a report to the police and after they left today, they concur. We can surmise that whatever the bad guys had planned for Jeffy was not in her best interest."

"But why, Eric?" Bree asked. "Why would anyone want to hurt Jeffy? She's not done anything wrong or dabbled in anything criminal. She's doing wonderful things. Things that could help so many people all over the world."

"Jeffy wiped out an entire disease and in doing so wiped out an entire industry," Eric answered.

"So, you're saying all the health workers that used to work with HIV patients are retaliating for loss of income?"

"Well, no, I'm not saying that but you are closer to the truth than you may understand. There are dark forces in this world, Bree, people, entities that are fueled by greed and the need for power. There is money behind everything. Money behind politics. Money behind war. Money behind things as simple as fashion and music, and there is money behind medicine. Big money."

"He's speaking of the pharmaceutical companies," Mark said.

"Yes, and there is even more to it than that. Jeffy has annihilated an entire disease. More so, she promises that she now has the key to go much further. With enough research and without the red tape, she thinks she can wipe out most diseases. Because she was able to do her research in her own private laboratories and answer to no one, she was able to get done what others could not."

"You're talking government interference?" Angel asked.

"Yes and no. Those dark forces I speak of have infiltrated pretty much every government. So, when some inspector from some agency closes down a lab and writes up some false report on why it was closed, no one thinks a thing about it. Jeffy's research has been privately funded and she does her research in labs that are strategically located all over the world. It makes it hard to keep tabs on her. Hard to oversee what she is doing. By the time she came out with the cure for AIDS, it was too late. I believe they intend to make sure she never has another breakthrough."

"This is crazy," Bella said.

Eric nodded. "Unfortunately, it's the reality of the situation." He blew out a long breath, drew another. "Jason and I, with Joey and Ameritech's help, we were prepared to really beef up security, go to red alert, so to speak, but I've just come from a little conference with Jeffy and Shelley. We will still up security, but Jeffy has decided that her presence in our lives is a danger to us all and she wishes to remove herself from our circle for a time."

"What are you talking about?" Joey asked, his temper flaring.

"You're not going anywhere," Mark said, looking fiercely at Jeffy. "You are not going anywhere. We're not gonna send you away because we're afraid. We won't live in fear."

"But I will," Jeffy said quickly. "I'll live in fear every moment of every day. Fear that something will happen to one of you because of me." She put a hand to her head, grimacing.

Eric immediately took note. "You okay?"

Jeffy only shrugged.

"We can take the heat," young Eric said from where he stood by the window.

Eric held up his hand. "I appreciate everyone's sentiment. I, too, believe that everyone must do what they must do in this world regardless of the danger, but I also understand where Jeffy is coming from." He looked around the room at the people he loved. "I, too, would be devastated if anything were to happen to any one of you, and I have no desire for Jeffy to be consumed with guilt if it did."

"So she will let these bad guys stop her work?" Ricky asked.

"No," Eric answered for her. "What she intends is to just bide her time for a while. Play dead, for lack of a better expression."

"Just where do you intend to go?" Jason asked.

Jeffy offered a stiff smile. "I believe I will seek solace and commune with Jesus in the Himalayas."

"Then you're planning an extended stay in the Buhxuroh Monastery in northern India?"

Jeffy nodded.

"How long?" Joey demanded.

"I'll stay until I feel it's right for me to leave." She stepped forward. "I know it sounds as if I'm running. I swear that I'm not. I'll make the bad guys think I'm done. I will make them believe that I am not furthering my research, though I assure you, at the monastery, I will be in the thick of it. In my own way. You must trust me. I feel strongly that this is for the best."

"But Jeffy, sweetie, you're my baby sister and I don't want you to

leave," Bree said, her eyes brimming with tears. "I don't see why you feel this is necessary."

At that moment the house phone rang. Eric picked it up from the table closest to him, glancing at the readout before he answered. It was the security agent at the front gate. "Yes?"

"Sir, I think you'd better get out here," a panicked voice said.

"What is it?"

"It's JoJo and Logan. It's bad, sir. A white van pulled up, dumped them out and took off."

Eric looked up from the phone. "Mark, Jason, Joey, come with me. The rest of you stay here."

"What's happened?" Shelley asked.

"It's JoJo and Logan."

Bella gasped, struggled to stand.

"Take care of her," Mark ordered before he, Eric, Jason and Joey ran out the front door, jumped into a car, and raced the near mile to the front gate.

The women huddled together, offering comfort to each other.

"Jeffy," Ricky said quickly as the ones left in the house gathered at the window. "Get your medical bag. Shelley, we'll probably need towels, blankets."

Nodding, they went to gather the supplies.

Outside, the front gate was open by the time the four men got there. Two security guards knelt by two bodies lying in the drive just outside the gate. They jumped from the car and couldn't believe what they were seeing.

Fifteen-year-old Logan lay on his back, semi-conscious, his arm turned at an impossible angle. He was moaning in pain. Eric knelt beside him, touched his hand to the young man's forehead. "I know it hurts, Logan. Hold on, son. We're gonna fix you up."

Mark dropped down next to JoJo who was face down and not moving. He looked at Jason and Joey, nodded, and they carefully turned him over. Even Jason, hardened by his years running the agency, was aghast by what he saw.

JoJo's battered and bloody face was not recognizable. He wore no shirt. His chest bore diagonal slash marks as a giant 'X'. Through tears, Mark looked closely at his son. "JoJo," he whispered. "Can you hear me?"

JoJo struggled to speak. "D, Dad?"

"Yes, Joe, it's me, son. I'm here now. You're gonna be okay, do you hear?"

"Logan—is he..."

"He's right here, son. He's gonna be okay too. We're gonna get you

guys up to the house."

While Jason stayed to get information from the security guards, Mark, Joey and Eric carefully loaded the boys into the car and headed up to the house.

Ricky opened the door as Eric and Joey carried Logan into the house, being careful to keep his arm stable. They laid him on one of the sofas.

"I think his left arm is broken," Joey told Jeffy as she immediately began to examine him. He went back out to help Mark.

Little Sophia began to cry. Breez scooped her up and took her to the kitchen. Bella, tears running down her face, dropped down on the floor by Logan's side. She turned when she heard everyone gasp as Mark and Joey carried JoJo in the door. They laid him down on another sofa, Shelley hovering over him, kissing his forehead, whispering words of love.

Jeffy quickly took in JoJo's more serious injuries and examined his eyes. He was sinking in and out of consciousness. She looked up at her mother. "We're gonna need to get these guys to a hospital."

Shelley nodded. "I've called 911. They're on the way."

"Hand me those gauze sponges," Jeffy ordered, pointing toward the first aid kit.

She began pressing them against the deep cuts on JoJo's chest. He stirred, tried to rise up.

"Lie still, Jo," Mark ordered.

"Dad, listen," he implored. "Two guys, they had guns. They forced us into a van. J– Jeffy. Th-they said it was about you. They said you had to stop. I told them to go to hell."

"Oh, JoJo," Jeffy cried. "I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. Not– your–fault." He fell back unconscious.

Jeffy turned her head to look at Bree, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Do you see now?" she cried. "Do you see why it's necessary that I go away?" She looked at her father. "Dad, will you schedule a press conference for tomorrow?"

Eric closed his eyes. *It has begun*, the man in Jeffy's dream had said. Eric had a feeling this was gonna be a very hard time, but they would get through it. He would make sure they get through it. "Yes, sweetheart, I'll take care of it."

Young Eric bent over the side of the sofa, pressed his forehead against JoJo's. They were cousins, born just a few months apart, but to Eric, JoJo was like a part of him. He'd been uncomfortable all afternoon. Now he knew why.

"Jo," young Eric said softly. "You're gonna be okay. Do you hear me? I said you're gonna be okay."

JoJo drew a ragged breath. "I hear ya, man," he mumbled. "Look after Logan."

Eric sniffed, unashamed of the tears in his eyes. "You know I will, but just until you get better."

"Got it," JoJo mumbled before he sank back down into oblivion.

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Psalm 37:12-13

"The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming."

Chapter Two

Mark stood at the door to the hospital room and took in the scene. His family was before him and even though at the moment they were not in great shape, they were all alive, and for that, he was extremely grateful. For the hundredth time, he raised his eyes heavenward and whispered a thank you.

His eldest son, JoJo, had a concussion, had taken forty-eight stitches in his chest, sported two black eyes, a split lip and was being carefully monitored. In the second bed, his adopted son, Logan, was still groggy from the anesthesia used when they set his broken arm. He also had a slight concussion. His wife, Bella, whom they thought a few hours ago was going into early labor, was sitting in a reclining chair between the two boys and had drifted off to sleep. The baby was fine.

All Mark could do was be grateful because things could be so much worse. He came forward with the cup and thermos of herbal tea his mom had just brought and knelt next to his wife.

"Bella," he whispered, watching as her blue eyes fluttered open.

She smiled at him. "Hi."

"How are you feeling? Any more contractions?"

"No. I'm fine." She placed her hand on her swollen abdomen. "We're fine."

"Good." He rose slightly so he could kiss her. "Mom brought you some tea. She's worried about you."

"Is she still here?"

"She went down with Eric to get something to eat. She'll be back up soon."

"She's so good to me."

"She loves you, Bella. We all do."

Bella smiled. "I know. You and your family are the best things that ever happened to me and Logan."

His smile faded.

"Oh, Mark," she said softly. "Tell me you're not feeling guilty about this."

"I'm not sure what I'm feeling."

"It hurts to see children suffer. I know that, but sweetheart, they're alive and they'll recover. They'll be even stronger for this. I don't regret for one second that Logan and I came into your life. I'm sure he would say that a little broken arm is no big deal."

"That's exactly what I would say," Logan said softly, trying not to wake JoJo.

Mark smiled up at him. "Hmm, you might not say that when you realize that you're not gonna get to play in the state football playoffs."

"Oh yeah. Well, that sucks, but I've got next year. I'm just worried about Jo."

"He's gonna be fine," Bella said. "You don't worry."

Logan looked over at his brother. Legally related through Logan's adoption, JoJo and he were closer than any brothers could be. "He looks terrible," Logan complained.

JoJo opened his eyes. "Thanks, bro. Backatcha."

Logan smiled. "I don't look nearly as bad as you."

"You both look absolutely beautiful," Bella said.

"Not beautiful," Logan argued.

She laughed. "Okay, then, what? Ruggedly handsome?"

"Yeah, that sounds better," JoJo muttered softly.

"Dad," Logan began. "I just want you to know what JoJo did."

"Shut up, Logan," JoJo commanded.

"You shut up," Logan countered. "They were gonna use ME, Dad. They were gonna cut me up because I was the youngest and they said hurting the youngest would hurt Jeffy more, or something like that. But JoJo stopped them. He challenged them to a fight. He told them that I wasn't a Kino. That I was adopted but when that didn't seem to help, he challenged them and called them chicken and finally riled them enough to take off the zip ties and fight him. He took out one guy. Pretty sure JoJo broke the guy's nose. But that was why they all jumped on him. They beat him so bad, I'm surprised he's alive. It was the guy with the broken nose who cut him. JoJo did it all to protect me. He's a hero."

"You do know that I didn't mean the part about you not being part of our family, right?"

"Of course. I knew exactly why you said what you said. What you did, JoJo, I guess all I can say is, thank you. But I'm also mad at you for doing that."

JoJo chuckled. "Sorry, brother, that I made you mad. You can get me for it later."

Bella reached out and took JoJo's hand. "Thank you, my hero. I love you, JoJo. I hope you know that."

He smiled. "Yeah. I know. I love you too."

"I'm proud of you, son," Mark said softly, bending to smooth back his hair and kiss his son's forehead.

"It was no big deal, Dad. Really. I couldn't sit there and watch them slice up my brother without trying to do something."

"I'm so proud of you too," Bella said.

Mark smiled. JoJo had never known his biological mother. His grandmothers were the only mother figures he'd had until Bella had come into their lives. It felt so good to see him respond so easily to Bella's love. He glanced at Logan who was smiling at him. Mark knew that Logan was happy to share his mother's love with JoJo. And soon, with a new baby sister. He was a lucky man. Yet, all was not well.

Mark's little sister, who'd been special from the day she was born, was in danger. The men who'd roughed up his boys had instructed them to report that Jeffy is to cease and desist all of her work. If she didn't, either she would die or those she loved would die. They'd chosen to use JoJo and Logan to make their point. They must have known that a threat to her own safety wouldn't stop her.

He hated that Jeffy was having to go into seclusion. Yet, he had no doubt that she was not running scared. She was simply slowing things down, playing her own game. She'd chosen to bide her time, and when she came back out, she would do it with both guns blazing. They were about to face a hard time, but he'd been taught all his life that sometimes things are difficult. All he knew was that none of them would be able to rest until their family was all together again.

Early in the morning, he would be meeting in Jason's office at Ameritech Security with the rest of the men in the family, plus a few of the outsiders who are considered part of the family. They would be meeting with their secret weapon, a highly trained operative who was one of the first members of a group simply called, Jason's Elite. This man, summoned Friday when Kimmie's car had been pushed off the bridge, would not only be Jeffy's shadow, he would be the family's eyes and ears where Jeffy was concerned.

❁

Scott wasn't tired. Even if he hadn't slept on the private jet Jason sent for him, he had a feeling he still wouldn't be able to sleep. His sleep cycle

was messed up not only because he'd spent the past three months in Turkmenistan, a country on the northern borders of Iran and Afghanistan, and his days and nights were mixed up, but because he was in Jeffy's proximity. At this moment she was only about twenty miles away, probably sound asleep and looking all soft and vulnerable in her bed. He'd spent the past five years of his life training for this day when he would be called upon to protect her. She'd been the focus of everything—his purpose in life, and now that he was so close, it was making him crazy. He had it in his mind to go over there.

The Kino home was on high security, but he was sure he could get in, with or without help. He didn't need to wake the family. He just wanted to see her. To lay eyes on her.

He shook his head. Ridiculous. It was the middle of the night and he had to meet with the family first thing in the morning. He'd see her soon enough. Still, the idea wouldn't let him rest. He'd worked too hard. He'd been through hell. With the help of Jason Lee and the Kino family, he'd been transformed from a naive, ex-college football player into a hardened field operative. Scott wasn't his real name, but it was what they called him due to his Scottish ancestors. Some would call him spy, some would say special ops, others might even say, assassin. He was none of those—and he was all, depending on his mission.

He'd been trained to kill and he had killed, but only in self-defense or to save an innocent life. The images still haunted him. Killing was never easy, but the alternative, the loss of innocent lives, was not acceptable. He believed, as did the Kinos, the Adams and the Lees, that the good guys, the strong guys, had a responsibility to serve and protect the innocent from the bullies of the world. That was what he'd been trained to do, and in order to do that, he had to be the strongest, the hardest, the fastest, the best, because only the best was good enough to stand watch over June Flower Kino.

Pacing back and forth across the living room of the small apartment that he'd called home on and off over the past five years, he thought about his life. He didn't regret the decision he'd made to join Ameritech. The path he'd been offered and accepted had been a godsend. An answer to a problem and the only way he could see to fix that problem.

He owned nothing. Even the custom-made motorcycle out front had been provided by Ameritech. He had nothing, other than what he'd made of himself. Grandmaster Kino, a man he respected more than any other and thought of as a father, had told him many times that what he'd accomplished was a considerable feat. Scott accepted that praise graciously. He had come a long way.

His own parents had never given two figs about him. Out of the forty-

something high school football games he'd played, they'd attended three. Three! Then, he'd received a full athletic scholarship to Oregon and he was sure they'd be happy about that. Not only were they not home the day he left for school, they never even attended a single game. After the first year, he'd stopped expecting, stopped hoping that his parents cared for him at all.

Even when he was home, they barely ever spoke to him. They'd made it plenty clear that he was nothing but a bother to them. Three years ago they divorced. His mother ran off to Italy with some aging, rich Saudi prince. His father headed to San Francisco with his executive assistant who was only two years older than Scott himself. He'd tried only once to contact either parent. They hadn't had time for him. He wrote them off.

He'd had a best friend all through high school. She'd gone to New York to attend college. They'd tried to stay in touch, but new friends and busy lives kept them apart. He made a mental note to try to reach her before he left the country again, which would be in about two days.

Scott made his way into the small kitchen, opened the refrigerator and stared at the shelves. Someone had bought a few groceries. There was milk and eggs and fruit and some meat wrapped in butcher paper, but he wasn't hungry. That wasn't the problem. Closing the fridge door, he ran a hand through his dark hair.

He could go out, hit a couple of hot spots, but that wouldn't fill the void. The void was deeper than anything could satisfy. The only thing that brought him solace was his newfound belief in Jesus. When he prayed, he felt peace. When he prayed, he felt truth and love and serenity. But right now, he couldn't get the girl out of his mind. Blowing out a breath, he realized, he had to do it. He had to see her.

Decision made, he moved quickly. Slinging his black bag over his shoulder, he was gone.

❁

She was dreaming. She knew she was dreaming, and she had no desire to wake for she wanted to see where the dream was leading her.

Light glowed from under a giant golden door. She stood poised to turn the handle and open the door, but before she could, angelic beings approached her and handed her gifts of various sizes. Small square golden boxes, larger rectangular ones, all wrapped up and glittering with shining silver and gold ribbons. They heaped them on her until her arms were full, then they opened the door for her and she stepped through the portal.

She fell through darkness and finally came to rest in a beautiful meadow filled with soft, green grass and beautiful flowers. Spying a path that led across the meadow, she moved forward, hurrying when she thought

she heard the sound of a bubbling brook– and then the darkness fell.

Suddenly, she couldn't see where the path led. Shadows flitted across the path, causing her to trip. A whip of darkness lashed out and circled her wrist. She struggled against it and finally broke free. Then another whip caught her leg, another caught her arm, some tangled in her hair. The dark strands pulled her away from the path, pulled her away from the light.

She struggled to break free, to make it back onto the path, to find the light. She fought with all her might but the darkness seemed so strong. She decided she wanted to wake up, but now, she couldn't.

Scott gazed down at Jeffy as she slept. She whimpered softly and he had to fight the urge to wake her and take her in his arms. Seeing her lying there, her long, dark curls spread out over her pillow, the slight frown on her beautiful face, the pout of her lips, the pulse point on her throat beating wildly, was like a balm for his aching heart.

He wondered what she was dreaming about that made her so restless. What nightmare brought about her whimpers and soft cries? He thought about the event that caused them to call upon him. Someone tried to kill her. They'd tried to kill an angel, one who had the power to truly change the world. They would try again. He was sure of that.

"No," she murmured softly.

He leaned close. "Shh, baby. Sleep. I won't let anyone hurt you."

His mouth was so close to hers. He breathed her in, closed his eyes, cherished her sweetness.

A warrior stepped forward out of the darkness. He drew his sword and light flashed from its blade. The light drove back the darkness. He slashed at the dark tethers that held her and they fell away. Grabbing her hand, he ran with her toward the path, but a horrible scream arose from out of the darkness.

The world began to tremble and she and the warrior tumbled and fell, down, down, over rocks and dirt to land at the bottom of a mountain. They looked up at the mountain and she wondered how they would ever get back to the top. "Shh," the warrior said. "Don't worry and don't be afraid. We'll make it together." He then pulled her close and laid his lips on hers.

Jeffy sat straight up, gasping for breath. Immediately, she reached for the light. Her eyes darted around the room. She totally expected to find someone there, but the room was empty except for herself. Rising, she moved to the window, looked out over the front lawn. For just a moment, she thought she saw a fleeting shadow, but knew it must be the effect of the

dream on her psyche. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms.



Scott watched her lithe form as she stood in the window. She truly did resemble an angel, standing there with the light behind her. He'd taken a chance by coming to see her, but he hadn't been able to resist. Deciding he'd better make his way back to the beach, he edged around the side of the house toward the back deck. He moved quickly and silently out toward the beach and headed south, the way he'd come.

Scott turned for a last glance at the house and came up short when he saw Grandmaster Kino on his balcony, looking directly at him. Slowly, he turned to face that balcony and bowed. Grandmaster Kino returned the gesture.



Jeffy looked over at her mother as they rode in the backseat of her charcoal-gray sedan. Shelley smiled at her, but the smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Everything is gonna be okay," Jeffy said, doing her best to offer comfort.

Shelley nodded, her lips trembled. "Of course it is, baby girl. It's just that, well, I'm gonna miss you so much."

"Remember when I went to Africa those two summers and then again for nine months when I turned twenty-one? You got through that okay. Just pretend I'm on a trip."

"Yes, well, someone wasn't trying to take your life back then," Shelley returned.

"They'll stop trying as soon as the press conference is over."

Shelley nodded, looked toward the two Ameritech agents. One drove and one sat shotgun. "Do you remember the last time we sat together in the back seat of my car with bodyguards in the front?"

Jeffy nodded. "How could I forget? I was seven, and Tommy Crane was trying to hurt us."

"He was trying to hurt your father. He was trying to kill you. It seems to be a theme. Someone trying to kill my baby girl."

Jeffy reached out, took her mother's hand. "Isn't it funny, Mom, that Tommy Crane tried to kill me using the disease that I just eradicated, all glory be to God."

"Funny isn't the word I would use." Shelley squeezed Jeffy's hand. "And yes, all glory be to God. He is using you, Jeffy, so I should take comfort in that, because if God is using you to do some of His work, then

surely He'll protect you."

"Exactly. So don't worry, Mom. I'm not afraid and I don't want you to be either. You and Dad have taught me that there are times that we have to do what we have to do even though it might be difficult. I'm gonna try very hard to live up to the examples you and Dad and my sister and brothers have set for me."

"I want to take it all back," Shelley said, half joking—but only half. "I want to put you inside the golden cage and keep you safe."

Jeffy smiled. Her mother had so often used that analogy of what we can't do when raising children. *We can't put them in a little golden cage and keep them safe from the world. For without freedom, they can never truly grow and learn and be happy. What good is being safe if there are no feelings of freedom and joy? If we aren't free to live and make choices, if all our choices are made for us, then we will never learn and grow and evolve.*

This time Jeffy squeezed her mother's hand. "I know you don't mean that, Mom, but I understand your maternal need to keep me safe. Trust me. Everything is gonna work out." The truth of that statement struck her. *Remember those words. You will need them.* She'd grown used to God's still small voice inside her head and she trusted the advice. "Mom, things might get bad, but whatever happens, just know that everything is gonna be okay."

Shelley looked into her daughter's eyes and realized she was giving her more than just a platitude. She nodded.

Jeffy thought about her connection to God and then of the experiences she'd had when she and her father attended the Intuition and Psychic Training Conference and then enrolled in the Association for Psychic Enlightenment Research. They'd learned a lot but knew of course, the association would be very "New Agey" in their thinking. One of the things Jeffy and her father found was false in their teaching was that though they admitted that there may be a "divine light" or a "universal power," they refused to call Him God. They pretty much denied God, denied Jesus Christ, a huge blasphemy. New Age had become Satan's tool, part of the occult, pulling baby Christians away from their beliefs.

Jeffy thought at first it had been comforting to meet others with many of the same abilities as herself. She'd felt much more at ease and even learned some tricks in how to hone her gifts, how to really listen, how to receive guidance and understand the answers. Her dad had done his best to help those they spoke with at the association to open their minds to the possibility that God was real and very active. They'd been asked to never speak about or even mention the name of Jesus while they were there, and

that had been the end of that, for neither Jeffy nor her father could deny Jesus. Not ever. Jeffy was roused from her reflections when the car pulled up to the hospital.

First, they would go inside and check on JoJo and Logan. Then, when the men return from their meeting, the entire family will stand side by side outside the hospital while Jeffy gives a statement to the press. She will inform them that she will be taking a hiatus from her research for an indefinite period of time while she gives her mind and body time to relax and recuperate from the strict schedule she's been keeping. She and the rest of the family would then field a few questions and within twenty-four hours, Jeffy will be making a clandestine departure from the country.



The room quieted when he came through the door, escorted by Joey. They'd been looking at surveillance maps that were spread across the large conference table. A high-tech radar map lit up a clear board behind the table. Jason had been in the process of zeroing in on a particular location.

There were so many technical gadgets, computers and communication devices in the room, it resembled a NASA operation.

They all dropped what they were doing and moved forward, hands extended, smiles wide.

"Dude," Ricky said jovially. "It's been a long time. Good to see you, man," he said as he pulled him in for a hug and a pat on the back.

Mark followed suit as did Justin Lee, Agent Jeff Davis and Agent Keegan Tanner. Every single one of them had taken part in his training. Some more than others, but he was grateful to them all and had immense respect for them.

He moved forward to shake Jason's hand. "Sir," he said.

Jason shook his hand, nodded. "Cameron."

He twitched at the sound of his own name coming from Jason's lips. They'd called him Scott for the past five years. They'd decided to change his name so they wouldn't accidentally mention his real name in front of the women, specifically Jeffy. It felt strange now, to hear his name. All this time it was as if he'd taken on a different persona and now, he was suddenly able to assume his real identity.

Jason shook his hand heartily. Their eyes met. Cam knew what Jason was thinking. He was thinking, this is it. This is the moment. This is why you trained so hard for five years. This is why you speak so many different languages, why you've traveled to Russia, Afghanistan, Iraq, North Korea, China, and every other hellhole. This is why you suffered through the torturous training and came out on top. So that you could be the one. The

one to protect Jeffy. Because you love her. Because it was the only way.

"I understand you went roving last night," Jason said, offering a slight smile.

Cameron nodded, his eyes slicing to Grandmaster Kino before he answered. "Yes sir. I, uh, needed, I mean— "

"There's no need to explain." Jason clapped him on the back.

Eric moved forward, offered his hand. "Cam, good to see you—again," he said pointedly, a twinkle in his eye.

Cameron nodded, smiled. "You too, sir."

"Let's get this briefing underway," Joey said loudly. "Press conference in two hours."



A jet, a plane, a train, a helicopter and a very long uphill hike and Jeffy finally stood in the small, cold room that would be her home for a time. The abbot, Adani Chandan Janjuar, had much respect for her father and her family, even though the Kinos weren't Buddhists. Jeffy had met the abbot several times when she'd visited the Indian monastery with her father. Today, he had been cordial and accommodating. Not so much to her bodyguards, but he conceded, placing them in a room next to hers at the westernmost wing's end.

Jeffy eyed the futon-like bunk, the small table with a single lamp which would be the only light in the room. A square-shaped basket sat on the floor beneath a wooden peg attached to the wall. The peg was usually used to support monks' robes. The basket usually held the other few items the monks owned. She tossed her duffel bag on the bunk, then carefully pulled off her backpack, unzipped the main compartment, and extracted her computer.

Smiling, she set her computer on the table. She always smiled as she fired up her computer because it was a work of art in itself. It held inside its tiny microchips, the latest, most highly advanced technology. With her computer, and thanks to Ameritech, the use of military satellites, she could and would be able to research from anywhere. She had links to three of her worldwide labs and assistants ready to help with anything. She had access to every database she'd ever need and would be able to communicate with her family and with Ameritech through coded and encrypted messages.

Her sister, Bree, had told her it was like she would be a high-tech heavenly spy. Jeffy didn't know how heavenly she was, but she knew what she had to do was important to every person living on Earth. That was the main reason Janjuar had allowed Jeffy and her bodyguards the extended stay, that and the fact that the Dalai Lama had sent his greetings and warm

wishes for an enlightening visitation.

She turned at a soft knock. "Come in," she said casually.

"Um, Dr. Kino, I'm gonna ask you to be a little more cautious," Agent Coley said as he came through the door.

Jeffy eyed the man. His looks reminded her of Agent Jeff Davis way back when she was seven years old and totally smitten with the man. Blond hair, neat and trim, pretty face, broad shoulders. Young. Agent Coley had been selected to protect her out of hundreds of prospects. He'd been chosen because he was good and because he was unattached. His tour of duty was only supposed to last two months, but he'd insisted that he wouldn't need the break, so he was here for the duration of her stay, and at this time, they had no idea how long that would be. Shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly, Jeffy grinned at him. "I knew it was you."

"No, you didn't," he argued. "You assumed it was me. Make no assumptions."

She saluted. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. Won't happen again, sir." She grinned. "However, I did know it was you."

He nodded uncomfortably. He hadn't meant to presume to instruct *the* Dr. Kino. The psychic Dr. Kino. It was just that he had no intention of taking the job lightly. "Okay, well, anyway, I came to install this." He held up a small metal device.

She watched as he attached the electromagnetic component to her door and smiled when he motioned her forward and gave her instructions on how to arm and disarm the device. To help lighten his mood and for her own entertainment, she stood close to him as he worked. Her psychic abilities kicked in and she immediately sensed his nerves and increased heart rate. He glanced up at her and she smiled at him, noting the beads of perspiration on his upper lip. To his credit, his hands remained steady as he manipulated the lock.

Finally he finished and took a step away. "You, uh, you arm the door by pressing this button here and holding it for two seconds." He demonstrated. "That small red light will come on. If it doesn't, then you didn't hold the button in long enough. To disarm it, you press these two buttons in this sequence: left, left, right, left, right." He looked up. "Please arm and disarm the lock now so I know you've understood."

She laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

He drew in a deep breath. "Look, I know you're smart and all, it's just that, maybe I made a mistake in explaining it to you. I'll sleep better if you'd just humor me."

"Okay," Jeffy conceded as she locked and unlocked the device.

"Where's Agent Akins?" she asked when she was done.

"He's in the next room making sure your opening the door registered on our alarm."

"It did," came a voice through the button on Agent Coley's shirt.

The agent nodded. "Roger that." He smiled at Jeffy. "Well, we'll be next door if you need us for anything. Anything at all," he stressed. "There is no such thing as a false alarm."

Jeffy smiled. "I promise to keep that in mind, especially since you've said those words to me dozens of times since we left the states. Thank you, Agent Coley."

He bowed slightly. "Ma'am."

❁

The man known only as Dr. Black swiveled in his chair to gaze at the man delivering the report. "What do you mean she's disappeared?"

Payne shook his head. "No one has seen her for days."

"Maybe she's locked herself away inside that giant house."

"Well if so, then we won't be seeing her because we haven't been able to get through their security. We can't even get a remote viewing system to work around that place. I'm pretty sure they're using a frequency jammer. The closest we've come to that place was when we were on the beach."

"And you couldn't even get that right."

Payne shrugged. "The two women look very much alike."

"Yeah, so you've said several times. So, she could be in the house. Do the lights in her bedroom come on at night?"

"Yeah, her lights come on," Payne said, wondering if Black truly thought that meant anything at all. "They could have it on a timer."

Dr. Black nodded, seemingly satisfied by this information. "Nonsense. Apparently it is exactly what she said in the press conference. She is taking some time off." He turned, hit a button. The large, flat screen immediately filled with images of June Flower Kino.

"I will be taking some time to myself. I'm sorry but I need time to refresh my mind."

"Will you be doing any work in your lab in Zurich?"

"I will not be doing any work or any research in any of my facilities around the world."

"How long do you intend to rest?"

"I'm unclear on that. An extended period of time. Let me just say that I won't be checking into any of my laboratories anytime in the foreseeable future."

He smiled. At least she and her family were savvy enough to make that

announcement. The Kinos' reputation for honesty is known by both their allies and their enemies. Not that he included himself in either category. That announcement should keep her from harm for a while, that is, if Echlon Loksalle can control his paranoia.

Dr. Black turned back to his man, Payne Lanske, a man who'd come with high credentials. Early forties, retired Marine, lean and mean and will do anything for the right price. "Keep watching," Black ordered. "I want to know if she goes out. That idiot, Loksalle, will kill her if she decides to go back to her research."

Payne gave his boss a mock salute.

Black continued to watch the screen. Both he and Loksalle wanted Dr. Kino to stop. They had too much at stake, too much to lose. Her brilliance would topple the world's economy. However, he differed from Loksalle, in that he didn't want her dead. He couldn't bring himself to destroy such a brilliant mind and such a beautiful creature. He wanted her alive—and he wanted her for more than her mind. He wanted her body and soul. He wanted her nod of approval and her respect. For now, he was simply glad she'd been smart enough to do the right thing, protect herself and her family by shutting down her research. Still, he wasn't fool enough to think she would cave so easily. She was biding her time. That was fine though, because he was doing the same thing. He could wait.

❁

Gasping, Jeffy sat straight up. The light from the not-quite-full moon illuminated the small room which her eyes quickly scanned. She was alone. No intruders. She'd been dreaming. She'd like to think that her dream meant nothing because there had been so much anguish and pain, but she knew that every dream meant something. Sometimes symbolically, sometimes literally. The trick was to discern the difference. Unfortunately, this one seemed quite literal.

She kicked off the blanket, went to the window and rose up on her tiptoes so she could see out. The back courtyard looked lovely in the moonlight. The area was more of a workplace. In the morning, laundry would be hung, gardens tended, crafts created. Beyond the courtyard was an open field and then the wall, another large field and a grove of trees. Above it all, the peaks of the Himalayas, which at the moment, were bathed in moonlight. She placed her hand on the windowpane. The night sky called to her.

Moving quickly now, she pulled on the linen pants and the long tunic that reached to her knees, swiped the blanket from the bed and disarmed her door. Her bare feet made no sound as she moved through the stone corridor

and out into the back courtyard.

It was cold but not unbearable. The climate here in northern India in December was not as brutally cold as one would imagine. The mountains actually blocked the cold arctic air, leaving this area in a subtropical-type climate. This time of year it was warm during the day. Yesterday had been in the seventies. And yet, even with mild daytime temperatures, at night, temperatures could plummet to below freezing. Tonight, she judged it to be in the mid-forties, which to her native L.A. blood, was still quite cold.

Moving out past the courtyard, she ran across the field, holding the blanket out behind her like a giant kite. She hadn't bothered to put her hair back in the usual braid she wore and it felt good to have the cold air blowing through it, lifting the heavy dark curls as she ran.

Tilting her face up toward the moon, she smiled, then laughed at herself, realizing what a spectacle she'd be making if any of the monks were to look out their windows as she had. She finally slowed and moved farther out, close to a tree that stood just yards from the wall.

Spinning once, she dropped to the ground. She shivered and pulled the blanket close around her. She drew a deep breath and lifted her face upward and as she bathed in the light of the moon and contemplated life, the tears began to course down her cheeks. Sniffing, she wiped them and then smiled again and began her prayer.

"Forgive me, Father," she whispered aloud. "I'm lonely, and yet, I know I'm not alone. I feel the weight of this burden and I ask You for help. I ask for a clear mind so that I may accomplish my task quickly. I ask that somehow, I'm able to overcome the darkness that doesn't want me to succeed. I know, Father, You've set me on this task and I put my trust in You. Please, help me to know how to overcome this enemy. I have so much and I give thanks for that. My family, without them I could never have come this far. Thank You for them, and please, please, please, Father, keep them safe. The circumstances I've lived with throughout my life have given me amazing opportunities. They make it possible for me to be here in this place at this time. I have freedom to pursue what I perceive to be my mission. I am so grateful for the freedom, for the opportunity and for the mission itself.

"I vow to stay the course no matter how hard this becomes. I will fight to the very end. I do this in love. Not in vengeance. Not in pride. Only in love for all the people of the Earth and in love and gratitude for You, and for the gift of your Beloved Son. With what You are showing me, there will be no more disease. No more little children dying of cancers while their families watch in horror as they waste away. No more parents leaving their

children. No more heart disease, which I know is absolutely preventable. No more government red tape keeping us from telling the world that they don't have to suffer with disease." She stopped, her head bowed lower. "In Jesus' name I pray, in Jesus' name, in Jesus' name. . . Amen."

When she lifted her face again, her eyes were closed. She drew a deep breath, placed her hands, palms facing upward, on her knees and sat very still as she tried to still her mind and listen to God.



Cam watched her from the shadows of the Rosewood tree. Coley and Akins had awakened when Jeffy had disarmed her door lock. They'd discreetly followed her out. He'd dismissed them, thinking Jeffy might be in the mood to run naked around the courtyard again. Tonight though, she'd kept her clothes on. It'd been too cold for her, he figured. He was torn between being disappointed and relieved.

He'd heard her softly spoken prayer and his heart went out to her. He yearned to do away with her loneliness himself. He would, when the time was right. He didn't feel it was right. She wasn't clear yet as to exactly what she wanted to do or how she wanted to go about doing it. She didn't need him to reappear in her life and muddy up her mind because almost assuredly, the moment she saw him she would be furious, to put it mildly. So, he would simply keep her safe until she figured out which path she needed to take.

One of his biggest concerns when he'd been training was that Jeffy, being psychic, would pick up on his presence. However, his training had included that scenario and he'd learned his lessons well. He was able to make himself almost completely invisible to her. It was amazing what the average human didn't see simply because they didn't expect to see it. Jeffy, on the other hand, was not average. Still, he'd been able to keep himself just out of her radar.

"Cam, check in," Coley's voice sounded in his ear.

He didn't answer him verbally but tapped the code on the tiny mic.

Agent Christopher Coley had a tendency to worry—not just about Jeffy, but about everyone. He was a good man. Young, brave and a stickler for the rules. Cam knew Jeffy was having fun and relieving her boredom by teasing Coley. He also knew she was attracted to him. What girl wouldn't be? Chris was a good man. It was difficult to stand by and watch, knowing she could possibly choose to start a relationship with him. Coley was a stickler for rules and would probably turn her down, but then again, Jeffy was pretty hard to resist.

From what Cam had heard, Jeffy had had only a few relationships since

he'd broken up with her and those few had been pretty rocky. Jeffy had always had a healthy opinion of herself so it surprised him when he'd heard that she'd lost confidence when it came to men. When all this was over he intended to put an end to that problem.

Sighing softly, he moved back a step when she opened her eyes and stood, wrapping the blanket tightly around herself. She smiled up toward the heavens, turned, and made her way slowly toward the building. Cam touched his mic. "She's coming in."

"Roger that," Agent Coley answered.



"You can do it," Christopher Coley yelled, urging Jeffy on.

"Go, Jeffy, make us proud," Hart Akins added.

They shut their mouths abruptly when Abbot Janjuar moved up beside them, yet neither agent could keep the grin from their faces.

April 1st had begun as any other day except for the jokes their resident ghost agent had played. Both Coley's and Akins' pant legs had been tied in knots, the floor in front of their door greased. Other than that it was business as usual. Morning meditations and prayers, breakfast, chores, and martial arts training—Siu Lum—as practiced by the Shaolin. As an honored guest, Jeffy was asked to demonstrate some of the martial arts she'd been taught by her father, who incorporated Siu Lum into his Zendo Ryu style. Zendo Ryu means the 'complete school of thought' and incorporates many techniques.

They'd been at the monastery almost four months now and it was only the second time Jeffy had been called upon. She'd been glad to show off a little. Somehow, the discussion had come to abdominal strength and a challenge had been issued, in good sport, of course.

Jeffy, Christopher and Hart joined twenty-two of the monks—the maximum number of available spaces allowed and held on to a metal bar suspended between two beams. With arms slightly bent they brought their knees to their chests, in time with the beat of a drum. One by one the monks had begun to drop off. The agents had made it to the final ten people hanging on the bars before they'd given out, one right after the other.

It was now down to Jeffy and two monks. The count was at three hundred sixty-seven. Jeffy's arms were beginning to tremble, yet so were the monks'. Coley and Akins had thought to call some encouragement to her. They nodded at the Abbot as he eyed them sternly. Then, he broke into a grin and turned toward the action. "Will you let this young woman win this competition?" he said loudly.

Everyone began cheering then, Chris and Hart included. Finally, one of

the monks dropped off, rubbing his abdomen.

Jeffy closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the movement. It wasn't her stomach muscles that were giving out, it was her biceps. She growled with the effort, pumped out eight more and finally dropped from the bar.

A great cheer went up from the monks, though they weren't cheering for their own win, but were cheering for all the competitors. Jeffy was being patted on the back, on the head, on the shoulders. Her arms were being pulled out straight and her biceps rubbed vigorously while she laughed.

Christopher and Hart joined her and congratulated her for going all the way to the end. She made some excuse for them about their heavier body weight being difficult to hold up for so long. Even though it was an excuse, it was actually true and so they took a tiny bit of comfort.

The Abbot moved to the center of the group. They immediately quieted. Smiling, he nodded and congratulated all on their stamina and asked them to contemplate what they may have learned about themselves during the course of the exercise. He smiled warmly at Jeffy. "I will see you in my office after the midday meal."

Her eyes lifted to his and she immediately knew what he would tell her. She nodded. "I'll be there."

Abbot Janjuar left the courtyard. The agents joined Jeffy.

"What was that about, do you think?" Chris asked.

Jeffy sighed. "I believe I'm being thrown out."

A short time later, while Jeffy washed and changed, the agents told Cam what she said.

"It's not because of the little impromptu competition," he assured them. "From what I can gather from my latest conversation with her father, both Grandmaster Kino and the Abbot believe it's time for Jeffy to venture out into public."

"They want her to publicly resume her research?" Coley asked, the worry evident on his face.

"No research, not publicly yet anyway. I think they're gonna suggest she move back out into the public eye."

"It would be nice to get back to civilization," Agent Akins said.

"Hmm, civilization? Well, *that* remains to be seen," Cam said with a grin. He nodded. "If you guys will excuse me. I have things to do."

"What do you suppose he meant by that?" Hart asked.

"By what?"

"That remains to be seen."

Chris shrugged. "Maybe we're not going back to civilization."

Hart frowned.

Chris smiled at him. "Ya know, Hart, you can always go in. Jason will send a replacement."

Hart shook his head. "No way. I'm with you on that. I'm not leaving her in anyone else's hands."

Christopher smiled. "Think positive, like maybe she wants to go to a remote tropical island."



There was no one around when Jeffy approached the Abbot's office. She knocked softly on the large door. "One moment," she heard Abbot Janjuar answer.

Jeffy took a seat on an ornate wooden bench just outside the Abbot's office. She wore her cream linen pants with the matching tunic and brown leather sandals. Her hair was washed and smoothed back into one long braid. Lifting her feet up, she crossed her legs in front of her on the bench and waited patiently as the "moment" turned into fifteen minutes. She could hear voices coming from inside the office and her high sense of curiosity drove her crazy as she wondered what they could be talking about because she couldn't read them.

"You may come in."

She heard that clear enough. Unfolding herself, she rose and went inside. As she approached the Abbot's desk she noticed a monk taking his leave. He was dressed in brown robes, much different than the other monks' saffron-colored attire. She'd glimpsed this one only a few times over the course of their stay. She tried to get a better look at him without being rude, but he had a hood pulled over his head and his face was in shadow. He kept his head bowed and silently left the room.

"Please, sit," the Abbot said kindly.

Jeffy did so. "I'm uh, I'm sorry about the little demonstration today. It wasn't my intention to make any kind of disturbance."

He smiled at her. "There was no disturbance. Your performance was inspirational and has been the source of quite a bit of soul-searching among the monks."

"Oh," Jeffy said, because she could think of nothing else to say.

"I've spoken to your father."

"Oh," Jeffy said again.

"Have you made any progress in your research?"

"I believe I have, actually. I've compiled a huge amount of data to substantiate my thought process. Currently, I'm waiting on some more lab

results. Once I have them, I feel certain I'll be well on the way to putting together a module."

The Abbot nodded. "If I may be so bold as to ask, once you do that, what are your intentions?"

Jeffy took a full minute to put her thoughts in order. "I intend to take steps to rid the world of disease. I intend to bypass all the governmental red tape and get the information and the reports out that will set the world's research scientists on the correct path."

"Then you don't intend to keep your information to yourself so that you will get the credit as the one who changed the world?"

"Me getting credit is not what is important. I know you understand that and simply wish to hear me say it. What I intend is to blast so much information out there that powerful government officials of every country won't be able to suppress it, and powerful doctors and scientists won't be able to deny it."

"How will you do this?"

"I intend to blindside the media. Before the bad guys know what hit them, the information will be out. I cured AIDS. The world will listen to me. My family and I are reputable. They will try to destroy our credibility, but it won't work."

"This will be a dangerous undertaking."

"Yes sir."

The Abbot sat perfectly still. His eyes drifted closed. Jeffy did not fidget. She knew he reached out to the heavens for inspiration. After almost half an hour, he opened his eyes. "You will leave here."

She frowned. "I'm not sure that I'm ready."

"Your mind is clear as to what you want to do. You have had time to find your peace. You have crossed a line."

"Crossed a line?"

"Yes, June Flower. You have moved from searching for serenity and guidance to hiding."

Jeffy drew in a deep breath, thinking to argue, but when she looked into his eyes she saw nothing but love and respect and kindness and concern. Drawing on her patience, she took a moment to consider what he was saying.

Had she been hiding? Well, of course, she'd been hiding from the men who were trying to kill her. Hiding her research from them, but that wasn't the reason she'd come to the monastery. She'd come as he said, to find peace and get her mind clear as to her intentions and she'd known for weeks now what her course of action would be. Why was she waiting to

pursue that? Maybe she *had* grown comfortable. It was too easy to stay here and live apart from the world. He was right. She'd been hiding. It was time for her to leave. She had to be in the fray in order to stay sharp. She had to keep the 'eye of the tiger' so to speak and to do that, she had to be in the thick of things. In the very basic thick of things.

Jeffy nodded her head slowly.

The Abbot smiled. "Do you know where you will go?"

"Yes. To Africa. There are several medical facilities that our foundation has set up there. I intend to check on them and then set up more clinics. A lot more."

Abbot Janjuar nodded. "This is a very large task in itself. Will this become another sidetrack to your original goal?"

"No. This is a stepping stone. I will once again be in the public eye. To others it will appear I am merely doing the 'Mother Teresa' type thing. I will be earning my brownie points with the public, while at the same time I finish my research. When the time is right, I will blast the media with my findings. I will do it in a way that the universities in the pockets of governments and the pharmaceuticals and the government-controlled media in every country will not be able to do anything other than jump on the bandwagon."

"This is a lofty goal."

"I believe it to be reachable."

"Because you believe then, it *is* reachable."

She nodded and looked up at him. "Do you believe?"

He nodded. "I do. I believe in you. Go forth, Dr. Kino, be strong and do not waver."

✝✝✝

2 Peter 3:11–12

"Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!"

Chapter Three

8 Months later - late November
Heal the World Medical Camp, Central Region, Uganda

"Dr. Kino, Dr. Kino! Let me go! Dr. Kino, help!"

Dr. Jim Munna struggled to hold the young boy who was screaming at the top of his lungs. "Hold on there you little brat. Will you just be still? We're gonna help you, but you can't see Dr. Kino."

The boy kicked out, his foot connecting with the man's shin. Dr. Munna grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "You'd better calm down, boy, or no one is gonna help you." He shook him again, harder, and the boy stilled.

Large brown eyes filled with tears. The child blinked hard trying to hold them back, but blinking only caused them to fall. He looked up at the man who held him. "Please, mister. Please, I must see Dr. Kino."

"Dr. Kino needs her rest. She works very hard and gets very little time to rest and she's asleep and she's not the only doctor here. Now tell me, what's the problem?"

The boy shook his head. "Ma-ma says to find Dr. Kino. She says it must be Dr. Kino. Dr. Kino will not let my sister die."

"Your sister, huh? What's wrong with your sister?"

The boy shook his head. "I must find Dr. Kino." Before Dr. Munna could react the boy jerked free and took off down the center of camp screaming at the top of his lungs. His scream was cut short when he ran straight into a man's large chest.

"What's the trouble now?" Agent Coley asked kindly. He'd seen the boy running and knelt down to intercept without hurting him.

"Come back, you little brat," Dr. Munna yelled as he ran up after the boy. The doctor came to a halt, breathing heavily. "Sorry. He got past me."

"It's no problem."

"Please, sir, I must see Dr. Kino," the boy cried.

"It's important, huh?" Agent Coley asked, noting the child's small frame and heavy accent.

"Very important, sir. It's my sister. She is very sick. My mother, she say only bring Dr. Kino. Please."

"I told him June is resting. He wouldn't listen."

Agent Coley rose, took the child's hand. "Come on then. Let's go find Dr. Kino."

Munna cursed. "Surely you're not gonna wake her. She doesn't get enough rest as it is."

"It looks like it can't be helped. Whether or not she takes care of the kid's sister is Dr. Kino's decision. Not yours and not mine," Chris answered curtly.

Dr. Munna frowned. "June hasn't got the good sense to take care of herself," he said.

Coley nodded. "I'll be sure to tell her you said so. Shall I include in my report the part where you mistreated the boy?" Without waiting for a reply, Coley turned and pulled the kid along beside him.

The boy looked the white man over as they walked. He was very large. And his hair was yellow. He wore camouflage pants and a brown shirt. He carried a pistol in a holster on his shoulder and had a knife strapped to his belt. His lips trembling, the boy stopped, looked up at the man. "You, you are a soldier?"

"Of sorts."

"You are not really taking me to Dr. Kino, are you? You are arresting me?"

"Arresting you?" Coley smiled kindly, wondering what kind of horrors the boy had seen to make him ask that kind of question. He knelt down again, to look the child in the eye. "No, I'm not arresting you." He held his hand up. "I promise you. You see, it's my job to protect Dr. Kino. I have to make sure no one hurts her." He frowned fiercely. "You're not gonna hurt her, are you?"

The boy's eyes grew wide. "Oh, no, sir. No. It's my sister. She is very, very sick. My mother lives in the village. She thinks my sister will die. She told me to run here. Find Dr. Kino. She told me no other. Just Dr. Kino."

"Hmm, okay then. As long as you're telling the truth, I will take you to her."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you. I will be very thank you."

Coley grinned at him, not bothering to correct his English. "No problem. She's right over here in this tent."

"This is the one who was making all that noise?" Agent Akins asked as

they approached.

"Yeah. His sister is apparently near death and his mother sent him here to find Jeffy. 'Only Dr. Kino,' he says, so I figure she'd want us to wake her."

Akins grimaced. "She's sound asleep, but I think you're right about that. She'll want you to wake her."

Coley nodded and slipped inside the tent. Even though it was only early evening, his charge was out like a light. She'd just come off a twenty-hour stint of watching over a young man who'd nearly cut his own leg off with a machete. Chris knelt beside her cot. "Jeffy?"

Jeffy heard someone speaking to her and thought for a moment she was dreaming. Forcing her eyes to open, she stretched and blinked several times. "Chris?"

"Yeah, Jeffy, it's me. Sorry to wake you."

She sat up quickly. "Something's wrong. What's wrong?"

"A little boy came running into camp demanding to see you. He says his sister is dying and his mother sent him from the village to get you. Apparently, no one else will do. Only you."

Jeffy patted Agent Coley's arm. "Thank you, Chris." She jerked back her covers and netting, grabbed her pants, and began pulling them on. She wore nothing but underwear and a tank top and Agent Coley turned quickly, giving her privacy, although he'd learned she wasn't shy about her body at all. "I'll, uh, I'll see you outside."

Still buttoning her shirt, she stepped outside the tent only seconds after him.

"Dr. Kino," the boy cried, obviously relieved. "Dr. Kino, you must come. Please."

"Yes, I *will* come, but first, tell me, what is your name?"

The impatience registered on his face. "My name is Balondemu though I am called Balon. Please, you must come."

"I understand, but first I need to know the symptoms."

His brow creased showing he didn't understand.

Jeffy smiled kindly at him. "Your sister, what's wrong with her?" she asked in his native Luganda language. "I have to know so that I know what to bring with me. Is she hurt or sick?"

His eyes opened wide with surprise. "Sick," he replied in his own language. "Very sick. Fever, shaking. She can't speak anymore. It happened like this some days ago, but it went away. Now it's back."

"How old is she?"

"She is five."

Jeffy stood, frowning.

"What is it?" Chris Coley asked.

"Probably malaria. I have to go." She smiled. "Balon, I will gather some medicine and then we'll go, okay? Agent Akins will take you to the jeep. Agent Coley and I will meet you outside the supply tent."

The boy's face lit up. "Thank you, ma'am. Thank you. I will be very thank you."

Jeffy nodded and looked the boy over. "How old are you?"

He raised his chin proudly. "I am eight years."

He was small, thin, making his large brown eyes seem even larger, but he stood tall and didn't waver. She nodded and smiled at him. "Balondemu—it means, the chosen one. Well-named."

Balon's face lit up with a brilliant smile.

In only a few minutes, Jeffy and Chris joined Hart and Balon in the vehicle. The village was only a few miles from their camp. The village was one of poverty. The surrounding lands were fertile and the villagers were either merchants or employed at the newly established school, or local farmers. There was a small hard-packed dirt area that was considered the 'marketplace,' which consisted of little more than a table with some baskets of locally grown food traded for either coin or commodities such as cloth or tools.

The clinic that was being built would change so much of this. Soon, this small place will become a flourishing village. People from surrounding areas will come for the school and the clinic. They will need things in their travels and the villagers will do their best to provide goods, but they won't be able to keep up so more will come to do the providing. Everything will change just as it had in other areas.

Balon directed them to the end of a group of small concrete block huts with tin roofs, situated in a semicircle. The moment they arrived, Jeffy grabbed her bags. Agent Akins insisted he go inside first to make sure all was as it should be.

"Clear," he called.

Jeffy entered quickly when she heard the panicked words of Balon's mother. "Please sir, don't hurt us."

"It's okay," Jeffy said. "I'm Dr. Kino."

The woman put her hand to her heart in relief. "Where is my son?"

"He's helping to get some supplies off the jeep," Jeffy answered as her eyes moved over the woman. She wore a blue-and-white dress indicative of the teachers at the school. Her hair was closely cropped. Her eyes were large, brown and hopeful. She was pregnant, maybe seven or eight months.

It was difficult to tell since the women here show early because they are so thin.

"My name is Mirembe."

Jeffy took the woman's hands in hers. Nodded. She looked toward the tiny girl curled up on the small bed situated against the wall. If not for the *Sweet Sleep* organization, which had provided beds for the village, Jeffy knew the child would be lying on a mat on the floor. However, she also knew that *Sweet Sleep* provided the ever-important mosquito netting along with the bedding and she wondered why there was none. "Your daughter is ill?"

"Yes. Her name is Sanyu. I have lost three children, Dr. Kino. I cannot describe to you the pain that is in my heart. Please, my Sanyu is very sick."

Jeffy had a million questions, but pushed them aside to take care of business. Moving forward, she began her examination. Little Sanyu's teeth were chattering. She moaned when Jeffy touched her. It was malaria, Jeffy knew almost immediately, but she took blood to confirm. When she finished her examination she turned to Mirembe.

"Your daughter has malaria."

Mirembe nodded as tears ran down her face.

"It's extremely dangerous for children this young. I would like to take her back to the camp so that I can monitor her. Of course, you can come stay, and Balon too. I would also like to take your blood to make sure you are not infected, since pregnant women are highly vulnerable to malaria and I see no mosquito netting in your home."

"It was taken."

"Taken?"

"We came from school one day shortly after we moved here to this village and it was gone."

Jeffy sighed. Back in America, people steal money, jewels, electronics, art, things they deem worth the most money. Here, there was much value in simple mosquito netting. She smiled at Mirembe. "Will you come to the medical camp?"

"You will save my daughter?"

Jeffy nodded. "I believe we have caught it in time. Mirembe, where is your husband?"

She looked down briefly then back up bravely. "He is dead. A security officer shot and killed him when they raided the radio station where he was a technician just outside of Kampala. Once my husband was gone, I could find no work. I met Ms. Ohaka who was looking for women who could read to work in small schools that were being established."

Jeffy nodded. "Ms. Ohaka and I have tried to coordinate many of our relief efforts, placing the new schools and clinics or hospitals in the same areas. She is a good woman."

Mirembe nodded in agreement. "She has been a godsend for us. When she made me the offer I packed up our things and followed her. That's how we came to be here in this village. Still, it has been very hard. While on our journey here, we were robbed and most of our belongings were taken."

"I'm so sorry, Mirembe. For the loss of your possessions and for the loss of your husband. When was he killed?" Jeffy asked, glancing at the woman's abdomen.

Mirembe's hand came up to cover her belly in a protective gesture. "It has been only four months. He didn't know about the baby. It is his last gift to me."

"How far along are you in your pregnancy?"

"I am five months."

Jeffy frowned. "You look much larger."

"Perhaps it is twins again."

Again? Jeffy saw no signs of any other children. "You say you've lost three children?"

"My eldest, Balon's older brother, died last year when a car swerved onto the side of the road and hit him as he walked from our home to see his father at the radio station."

Jeffy watched as large tears gathered in Mirembe's eyes. Reaching out she took the woman's hand to offer comfort. This small woman had been through so much tragedy. "And the other two?"

"Three years ago, I gave birth to twin girls. They were so tiny and so beautiful. Their lungs were not fully developed. The doctor at the hospital said their chances were very good and then only one week later, they were dead."

"I am so sorry," Jeffy said softly. "Mirembe, do you believe that I want to help you?"

"You are the only one I believe in," Mirembe said. "Everyone knows your name. You are very famous in Uganda. In this village, everyone knows the school wouldn't be here if your *Heal the World Foundation* didn't work with and encourage the other organizations to work together. We are grateful for your help."

Jeffy smiled. "And I am grateful to have the means to be able to help. Right now though, it's you in particular and your little Sanyu that I wish to help. Let's get you and the children to the hospital camp."

Jeffy wrapped the thin cover around little Sanyu and scooped her up.

Her body was hot and she trembled violently. Jeffy pressed her lips to the girl's small forehead. "There now, little sweetie, we're gonna make you all better."

Back at camp it wasn't long before Jeffy had Sanyu on fluids and medicine. The child was cleaned and tucked into the small cot with fresh linens. Balon went with Agent Coley to bed down for the night. Once Jeffy was satisfied that Sanyu was resting comfortably, she turned her attention on Mirembe.

The woman showed no symptoms of malaria; however, Jeffy examined her and told her she, too, believed she was carrying twins. Mirembe gave Jeffy permission to consult with Dr. Todd, an OB/GYN. Dr. Todd was roused and, with his usual congenial bedside manner, confirmed the twin pregnancy. He then expressed concern for Mirembe's diet, for an undernourished mother is more likely to deliver a baby who is nutritionally deprived, which in turn could compromise all of the babies' organs. With twins, the threat is doubled. Jeffy could tell that Mirembe was taken with Dr. Todd's young good looks, just like all the other young women with whom he came in contact. Mirembe promised him she would strictly follow his orders and see him on a regular basis. She was given a meal, then settled on a cot right next to her daughter.

Mirembe lay in the tent hospital, watching Dr. Kino take Sanyu's temperature, then tuck the blanket around her daughter as if she were fragile and precious. Suddenly Mirembe realized she felt safe and comfortable. Something she hadn't felt since the last time she'd lain in her husband's arms. Dr. Kino was a good person. There are still good people in the world, she thought. It was a soothing realization. She sighed in contentment. "Dr. Kino?"

Jeffy came to her. "Yes?"

Mirembe held out her hand. "I want to say I am grateful."

Jeffy took the offered hand. "I'm happy to help. Truly."

"Will you still be here when the babies come?"

"I'm supposed to move to a new location next month, but maybe we can prolong my stay here a little longer."

"Promise me you will be here when my time comes."

Jeffy sighed, looked into the woman's beautiful brown eyes and finally nodded. "I promise. I will be here for you."

Fifteen minutes later, Richard Todd and Jeffy stood side by side in the hospital tent watching their two patients as they settled in to sleep. Richard glanced down at Jeffy. "Why don't you get some rest, Dr. Kino? I can monitor them or we can wake up one of the nurses to take a night shift."

Jeffy frowned. "I promised I would save Sanyu. I'll feel much better if I stay with her for the next twenty-four hours."

"I knew you would say something like that." He moved quickly, grabbed an empty cot and placed it on the other side of Sanyu. He then scooped Jeffy up in his arms as she gave a slight squeal and deposited her on the cot. Bending over her, he removed her stethoscope and hung it over the edge of the cot, pulled a thin blanket over her and pulled the mosquito netting that enclosed Mirembe and Sanyu around to include Jeffy and himself.

He leaned over her. His fingers touched her cheek, brushed some stray curls back from her face. "You are an amazing woman, June."

His eyes dipped to her mouth and she knew he wanted to kiss her. She thought about letting him. Then again, she'd thought about letting Chris the other day when they were in almost the exact same position. It flashed in her brain that lately, men were always putting her to bed. She was so tired. Logically, she knew that was the only reason she even considered being intimate with these men. She was craving comfort, release, and it didn't hurt that they were young and strong and kind and cute.

Apparently, her stillness must've seemed like an invitation, for Dr. Todd's head lowered. She was too tired to fight. His lips touched hers softly and she felt her core quicken, heat gathering low in her body, her pulse leap. She had flashes of his hands on her, doing things to her, and she realized she was reading his mind.

What was she doing? She didn't love this man. She liked him, as a friend, but certainly not enough to kiss him. Her first encounter with kissing a guy had begun almost as a science experiment that had turned quickly to passion. As she thought of that first encounter, she gave a soft moan and it took her a moment to remember that it wasn't Cameron Wallace kissing her. And it never would be again. She pushed Richard away.

"No, Richard," she said softly.

He stilled. Looked into her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

"I can make you feel very good."

"And the next time I kneel down to pray that's what I'll tell God. I'll say, 'Well, I disobeyed Your law because I was tired and he said he'd make me feel good.' And God would ask me, 'And do you feel good now?' And I would have to tell Him that indeed I did not."

"So, you talk to God and He actually talks back to you?"

Jeffy started to make a smart remark and ask him, "Doesn't everyone?" but realized it was a teaching time. "God is real, Richard. And yes, He will

talk to you if you take the time to develop a relationship with Him. You will begin to recognize His voice."

He smiled. "Maybe I'll give that a try someday. Anyway, just remember. I'm here for you if you need someone to turn to."

She sighed. "Well, thanks for not forcing the issue, but I just told you, I have someone to turn to."

He nodded. "Get some sleep."

"I'll try. Good night."

She watched him leave the tent and sighed. She never pushed her beliefs on anyone. She and her family had learned that example is the best teacher. Hundreds, probably thousands of people had found God through the examples of her father, the instructors who teach at the Kino Studios, through Ameritech and their more than twenty thousand employees, and through her own foundation and the Kino Challenges. But Dr. Todd wasn't open to it. Oh, well, those who have ears to hear will indeed hear.

As Dr. Todd left the tent, Agent Akins nodded at him sternly. The doctor nodded back. He'd briefly forgotten that her bodyguard was standing outside. The man had probably heard or even seen what had just taken place which was the reason for the stern look.

"Akins," Dr. Todd said casually. "Guess I'll go get some rest."

"You do that," Akins said curtly.

Yeah, you do that, Cam thought from his place of hiding. It'd been difficult to watch what had just taken place and not intervene. Not that Jeffy needed him to. She could handle herself. Still, to see another man kiss her– well, it was difficult to say the least. He sighed. Very soon he would reveal himself to her.

Grandmaster Kino had said she was on a roll putting together a model for research that would lead every scientist worth their salt to the correct conclusions. With the help of those scientists, the work to do away with human disease could indeed be accomplished in their lifetime. Cam knew Jeffy was at the computer typing and researching for hours and hours every day after her shift ended. He didn't want to throw a monkey wrench into her line of thought by showing up in her life and knocking her for a loop. He would soon though, because not only did he need her, she needed him as well. He was sure of that.

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Jeffy felt tiny, gentle fingers stroking her cheek and slowly opened her eyes. The dawn was breaking. She was lying on her side and looking into beautiful brown eyes. Jeffy smiled at the small girl. "Hello," she said quietly.

"Are you an angel?"

Jeffy laughed softly. "No, sweetie. Not hardly. I'm a human just like you."

"Oh, no ma'am. You aren't just like me. You are very shiny."

"Shiny?"

"Yes ma'am. You have golden light all around you."

Jeffy blinked. "Really? Well now, that's very interesting. So tell me sweet Sanyu, you can see this light?"

"Oh, yes. It is very bright."

"Then you are very special because only very special people can see the golden light."

The child smiled brightly. Her hand rested on Jeffy's cheek and Jeffy pressed her own hand over Sanyu's. Closing her eyes, she used her psychic abilities to probe Sanyu's mind and body. She detected no pain or discomfort. Only peace and love.

"You are very beautiful," Sanyu said.

"So are you," Jeffy answered.

"Are you sure you're not an angel?"

"I'm sure."

"Why are you here?"

"I'm a doctor. I'm gonna help you to get well."

"Mama says the doctors are our friends."

"That's right."

"Are you *my* friend?"

"I would be honored to be your friend."

"Always and forever?"

"Always and forever," Jeffy assured her. "Ya know, little Sanyu, you speak English very well."

"I speak better than Mama and Balon."

Jeffy smiled. The child yawned.

"How are you feeling?" Jeffy asked as she sat up.

"I feel very good."

"Very good, huh? Are you hungry?"

"Yes ma'am. I am hungry and thirsty."

"Wonderful. I'll get you some food."

Jeffy rose to get started on her day and to see about her patients. She was intrigued by little Sanyu. The child was beautiful and smart and apparently—she could see auras. It would take her a few weeks to recover from her illness. By then, Jeffy would be able to help Mirembe recoup some of their lost belongings including their mosquito netting, otherwise,

the next bout with malaria could be the fatal one, for Sanyu, for Mirembe, Balon and especially the two tiny coming additions.

Jeffy thought about the promise she'd made to Mirembe to be here to help her babies come into the world. That would be at least three months from now figuring the twins would come early. Jeffy was supposed to move to the new camp in one month but she would have to delay. That didn't mean the others couldn't move on and get started. She could take a few trips to check on things. She sighed. It really didn't matter either way. *A promise is a promise.* Her father would tell her that she might consider being a little more particular about making those promises. Her mother would tell her once again that she must learn to say 'no.' Still, neither of them had to look into the big brown eyes of a pregnant woman who'd already lost her husband and three of her children.

She stepped outside the tent and was greeted by Agent Hart Akins.

"Good morning," Jeffy said quietly, aware that the majority of the camp was not yet awake.

"Good morning," Agent Akins returned. "I'd guess you got about four good hours of sleep. Congratulations."

"Yeah, thanks. I'd say something about not needing— "

"Let me go!"

"Give it back you little brat."

Jeffy and Hart moved quickly toward the yelling. Dr. Munna had Balon in a headlock. Agent Coley arrived on the scene, shirtless, his pants unbuttoned and gun in hand.

"What is going on?" he barked.

"Let—him—go," Jeffy ordered, her voice deadly quiet.

Chris and Hart immediately recognized the Kino trait to become very calm and very quiet when they were the most upset. It was characteristic of Grandmaster Kino and most everyone he'd trained including Senior Agent Joey Adams, his older brothers Mark Adams, Ricky Kino and boss man Jason Lee.

The doctor let the child go. "I caught him stealing," he argued.

"No ma'am, I was— "

"Don't go feeding her your lies."

Jeffy stepped forward, her voice suddenly light and airy. "Oh, now, Dr. Munna—Jim—I so appreciate your stalwartness in watching over things here in camp."

Both agents, Chris Coley and Hart Akins, rolled their eyes. Munna was a jerk and everyone knew it. Jeffy, though, had a way about her, trying to see the good in everyone, defusing bad situations with love and kindness.

"It probably appears Balon was stealing, but I'm positive he had something else in mind." She knelt down in front of the boy. "Didn't you, sweetheart?"

Balon nodded timidly, unfolding his shirt to reveal four highly prized apples. "I brought breakfast for you and Mama. An apple for each of you."

Jeffy knew the apples would be such a treat in the child's eyes. "Oh, Balon," Jeffy said softly. "How very thoughtful of you. Isn't it sweet, Jim, how he thought to bring us breakfast?"

"Oh yeah, sure, and who are the other two apples for, huh?"

His big eyes looked up at Agents Coley and Hart.

"For my new friends," he said softly.

Chris and Hart grinned.

"But Balon," Jeffy said with a smile. "You forgot to get one for yourself."

He smiled shyly. "I was gonna ask if I could have one after I gave one to you."

"Of course you can have one." Jeffy rose, still smiling, and looked into Dr. Munna's eyes. "Thank you for being so alert, Jim. I know after being here a while, away from all the comforts of home, we can sometimes forget our reason for being here. Nevertheless, we shouldn't ever forget the love and compassion that brings us here in the first place. If we are gonna do the work of angels, then our demeanor must be angelic, don't you think?"

Red-faced, Jim Munna nodded silently.

She placed a hand softly on his shoulder. "I know you're worried that I don't get enough rest, but I'm thinking perhaps it's you who isn't getting rest. I insist you take no more double shifts."

"But—"

"I really need you, Jim. I need you at your best. I'd hate to even imagine what I'd do if you weren't here to help me run things. Please, I insist you take care of yourself."

Dr. Munna nodded, glanced down at the child, then back up at Jeffy.

Her eyebrows rose and she nodded encouragingly.

Finally, he bent down, looked Balon in the eyes. "Breakfast for Mama, huh?"

Balon nodded warily.

"That's a good boy," the doctor mumbled.

Balon smiled.

"There now," Jeffy said brightly. "Everything is as it should be."

Coley raised his eyebrows, glanced at Akins who was shaking his head in wonder. While Jeffy took Balon by the hand and led him in to see his

mother and sister, Hart moved in close to Dr. Munna.

"Listen to me very carefully," he said quietly. "You ever manhandle one of these kids again and I'll break your freaking nose." He backed away, smiling brightly, mimicking Jeffy. "And I mean that in the nicest way." He turned to his partner. "Chris, go get some sleep. You got two more hours."

Chris nodded then turned and gave Dr. Munna a slight salute. "Nitey-nite."

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There is no way to truly describe celebrating Christmas in Uganda, Cam thought. They call it Sekukkulu. Even though much of the celebration lies in the weeks and weeks of preparations, just like it does in the states, it came to its culmination today. The village and its people, especially the women were decked out in their finest. Delicious foods had been prepared including chickens roasted with bananas. The *Heal the World Foundation* clinics and hospitals all across Africa and South America had generated millions of Christmas gifts for children and adults alike, and today they had reveled in the giving of those gifts here in this village and to the surrounding villagers who had come to partake in the huge celebration. It helped that the celebration also included the opening of the new, fully-staffed clinic. This small village was about to be a town.

Cam had made friends with a few trusted villagers. They called him "the ghost," for they said he could disappear and reappear whenever it suited him. They didn't speak of him. They kept his confidences for they loved Dr. Kino and understood him to be her secret protector, and they kept him housed and fed, especially during monsoons and on holidays.

Today, he had been fed graciously and while he digested, he was enjoying watching the doctors and nurses and villagers and swarms of children playing baseball together using plastic bats and balls. The day was sunny and warm, in the eighties, and love and goodwill abounded.

Jeffy had been coaxed into playing ball and she had just stepped up to the plate, made from a piece of cardboard, her bat held high and a fierce look on her face.

"You're doing it all wrong," she called out. "You gotta go through the routine. You see, first, you have to get the sweat off your hands." She scooped up a handful of dirt and rubbed her hands together and let the dirt fall. "Next you have to knock the dirt off your shoes." Using the bat, she tapped each foot. "Then, you have to dig in at the plate." She moved each foot side to side until she felt set.

Cam's eyes left the entertainment briefly to check the position of her bodyguards and to scan the giant crowd for anyone looking out of sorts or

out of place. Satisfied that there was no imminent danger he let his eyes go back to roam over the present batter. Her khaki pants hugged her backside. She'd removed her over-shirt and wore only a white tank top which allowed everyone to see her amazing muscular definition. Her shoulders, biceps and triceps although small, were strong and defined. Her thick, dark hair was back in her usual braid which came to the middle of her back. The heat and humidity made the tiny stray hairs curl around her face which accentuated her large brown eyes and long dark lashes. With her tan skin and her sweet smile, Cam thought she looked like some Polynesian princess. A very sexy Polynesian princess.

"Then you gotta spit," she continued with her tutorial.

Everyone laughed as she spat in the dirt. Cam smiled. Well, he thought, a very crass Polynesian princess.

"Then you have to bend over like this and wiggle your bottom."

The players and spectators, especially the children, all giggled as she exaggerated the wiggling of her hips. Cam had a decidedly different reaction altogether.

"Then you have to take two practice swings. Not one, not three. How many did I say?"

"Two!" the children all hollered back at her.

She grinned. "That's right. One—two," she counted. "And then, you nod, ever-so-slightly at the pitcher, to let him know that you're gonna knock his pitch out of the park." Squinting her eyes, she nodded at the pitcher whom at the moment was Dr. Richard Todd.

Richard gave a silly crazy wind-up and threw the ball. Jeffy swung so hard she spun around.

"Striiikke one!" the umpire and several others called out.

Jeffy made a face.

"Good swing, good swing," one of her teammates called reassuringly. "You're ready now."

Jeffy grinned. "Come on pitcher, let me see what ya got!"

The doc grinned and threw the ball. Jeffy let go of one of her hands so that she could get better leverage on the too-light bat and smacked the ball. She took off toward first base while dozens of children scrambled after the ball. Jeffy should've held up at second base, but she kept running.

"Throw it, throw it," one of the nurses who was playing third base called excitedly.

Somehow the child threw it and got the ball there before Jeffy. Jeffy came to a stop, then turned and started back to second base. The nurse threw the ball to one of the three older children who were all playing

second base. He grinned at Jeffy. Jeffy turned back toward third, and then suddenly it was a free for all. Every child on the field converged on Jeffy and wrestled her down to the ground.

Cam stood and watched the crowd carefully. Akins and Coley circled around the mound of giggling bodies. They began clearing them away from Jeffy until she struggled to her feet, her face and body dirty and sweaty.

"You're out!" the umpire yelled.

Hands on hips, Jeffy pouted before she grinned and a cheer went up for her effort.

Cam smiled at Jeffy's antics. She was love personified. She was a child at heart, and she was the woman he loved. She'd ruined him. From that very first night when she was fifteen years old and she'd asked him, the experienced guy, a year and a half older, to teach her about sex, to make love to her, he hadn't been able to resist. Heck, he'd been a randy teenager and the most beautiful girl he'd ever met was begging him to take her. Her lure had been so potent he'd almost forgotten that she was a member of probably the deadliest family of martial artists on the planet.

At first, it had only been about giving her the experience she wanted. While other girls her age were getting their first taste of high school, Jeffy had already been in college and sex was a major topic. Fifteen and still a virgin, she'd decided that in order to understand what she was learning about the physical body in her schooling, she had to know or have the experience.

They'd started out in almost a clinical-type atmosphere as Jeffy had compared what was happening to what she'd read in the textbooks. However, they'd been unable to keep it clinical for long. He'd kissed her and when things got hot and heavy he'd rushed to the store to buy condoms. By the time he'd gotten back, she'd come to her senses and he'd actually realized it, even through the wave of teenage hormones. She'd been willing to go through with it so as not to disappoint him. He was the one who backed off and told her not to worry about it.

Feelings took over quickly. Jeffy had been too loving, too sweet, and he had too much respect and admiration for her. Then, she'd been kidnapped by Senator Daley's henchman and Cam had followed and he'd rescued her and they became bound together forever. Yet, as their relationship continued, he began to realize it wouldn't work. Not the way things were going. He had nothing to offer. There was no way he could compete with her mind and physically, she was a highly-skilled martial artist, trained by the best. He looked up to her. She had nothing to look up to in him. Oh, she loved him, but one day, she would realize that he had

nothing to offer her, nothing to admire, and he didn't want that day to ever come.

He knew he had to be the best at something. He knew he had to leave her and make something of himself so that the day when she looked at him and saw he was nothing, would never come, and so that he could one day come back into her life and start fresh. He needed her to see him as a man she could admire and respect. One she could look up to and depend on. He had become that man, thanks to the plan put together by Grandmaster Kino and Jason Lee.

When Cam had broken up with Jeffy five years ago, he'd hurt her. It couldn't be helped. Now, it was finally time to come back into her life, and he was both excited and nervous. He had to make her understand why he left, why he hurt her and he had to make her fall in love with him all over again. He had no idea if that was even possible, yet he'd already bet everything on making it happen. He'd planned to make an appearance very soon, to show himself to her and work his way back into her good graces. Unfortunately, she'd been asked to speak publicly in Kampala in February and to his surprise, she'd accepted. She'd said it was time to test the waters, to get a reading on the public's expectations of her and to see if her enemies would be there and/or if they would try to take her out again.

Immediately he'd been contacted by Jason to let him in on the news and to plan for her protection. They had a feeling things could get ugly when Jeffy spoke and announced news to possibly begin researching again. Boss man Jason felt it would be better if Cam stayed in the shadows a little longer. Cam agreed.

As far as anyone knew, she'd been spending her time meditating in a monastery and doing public service in the field with her foundation. What they didn't know was she'd been putting together a text-book series that will steer not only the scientific world, but the world in general in a direction that will cure disease and illness once and for all. It'd taken her over a year to compile and arrange all of her theories and her concrete research and lab results into a coherent, convincing, workable structure. She had irrefutable evidence. She had it down in black and white. Her series included summaries of the economic and political problems that are attached to a true medical breakthrough and gave a clear picture of why those problems had to be severed and just how to go about doing that severing.

She had summaries in layman's terms written out for the correct political allies, for the public, for the health movements, for the religious groups. She had done it. She was about to set the world on its ear. She had

some fine-tuning to do, and then everything had to be orchestrated just right, for it was not her intention to ruin people and companies financially. Certain people in certain government positions, at heads of pharmaceutical corporations, deans of medicine, will be given a chance to jump on the bandwagon, before, but only just before, the work was presented to the world. If they elect to stay with business as usual, to stay in the darkness, then their world will come tumbling down. If they elect to turn their back on her irrefutable evidence, then they are no better than criminals. Organized crime at its deadliest. Wolves in sheep's clothing who pretend to care about the health and well-being of the human race, but are actually more concerned about their bottom line, willing to let millions suffer and die to keep things that way.

Even worse, though it was hard to comprehend, some of them had motives that were much more nefarious. They were actually actively working to depopulate the world. Get rid of the elderly, the sick, the poor. They were willing to manufacture illnesses and get filthy rich on fake vaccines. It was Satan at work, and Jeffy and her family were fully aware of that.

Cam had many preparations to make to prepare for the next phase, to ensure Jeffy's safety at her public appearance and afterward. He'd partied long enough. He caught Hart's eye and nodded. Hart gave a slight salute and watched as Cam disappeared into the crowd.

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Tilting her face up toward the sun, Jeffy couldn't help but smile. What a glorious day. Of course, she missed her family and they missed her too, but sharing this day with these wonderful people, both the ones in the village and the ones who worked at the medical camp, was very special.

She eyed Dr. Gretchen Hall, the doctor who would take charge of the clinic once Jeffy and her group moved on to the next location. Gretchen was beautiful, dedicated and brilliant, and was at this minute giving a child directions on what to do when he got up to bat. Beside Gretchen was Ada Sarr, one of the four native Africans Jeffy had on staff and the head nurse who had been traveling around Africa with Jeffy. Ada had decided to remain on staff at the new clinic. Jeffy thought that may have something to do with a certain handsome school teacher from the village. That, and the fact that she and Gretchen had become very close friends.

Looking over the playing field, it was easy to spot Dr. Donald McTalley, known as Mc-T, with his bright red hair, as he swung a little girl up into the air. His easy smile and charming Scottish brogue served to make him very popular. Her eyes drifted back to the current batter, her sweet

Balon.

"Go, Balon, go!" Jeffy yelled as he smacked the ball and headed to first.

"He did it!" Sanyu cried, clapping her hands as she crawled up on Jeffy's knee.

"He sure did," Jeffy said as she laughed and pulled Sanyu up and nuzzled the girl's neck.

It had become second nature. Every time Jeffy sat down, it seemed Sanyu would crawl up in her lap. Jeffy loved Sanyu and Balon as if they were her own. She loved Mirembe, too, and was very much looking forward to the birth of the twins and to getting Mirembe back on her feet and back to full health. It had only been a month since Jeffy had first met the beautiful family that had captured her heart, but she couldn't imagine not having them in her life.

Jeffy glanced over at Mirembe. They'd left her lounging in the shade. She looked hot and uncomfortable and was fanning her face as she spoke to a few of the other women.

"Shall I bring Mama some water?"

Jeffy smiled down at Sanyu. It seemed the young girl was in tune with everything Jeffy was thinking. "I think that would be wonderful."

Sanyu smiled. "I will bring her some fruit also." She jumped down from Jeffy's lap, then turned back and put her arm around Jeffy's neck, leaned forward and kissed Jeffy's cheek. Without another word, she ran to gather the water and fruit for her mother.

"You have a friend for life I think," Agent Coley said.

Jeffy smiled up at him. "She's so sweet. Balon too. They've made my life so much richer for knowing them."

"What are you gonna do when you have to leave them behind?"

"It's gonna hurt. I'm gonna miss them so much. I wish there was a way to bring them back with me. You know, the whole family. Mom would so love to meet this little family. She'd be right in her element."

Chris shrugged. "Why can't you? How difficult could it be to transport one small family?"

Jeffy looked up at him, her eyes taking on a glow. "Exactly! Why not? It couldn't hurt to try. I think I'll talk to Mirembe and see what she'd think about visiting us in America."

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Ecclesiastes 5:19

"Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God."

Chapter Four

Present Day, Late February
Kampala, Uganda

Cam had watched Jeffy on the terrace as she'd stood in the moonlight waiting for her time to speak. She'd been beautiful in the moonlight. Mr. Ormandi had come to tell her it was time to speak and Jeffy had seemed apprehensive, which had put Cam on high alert. Her instincts were usually right on and Cam would never simply shrug them off. As lovely as she looked up on the stage at this moment, he could tell from her furrowed brow and increased respiration that all was not right.

Jeffy's large, brown eyes scanned the crowd. She felt uneasy. Usually she had no problem with being in front of people; however, today it seemed there were too many eyes looking too deep. She'd held everyone's attention as she'd given her carefully worded speech. At the end she offered to entertain a few questions. She'd been answering them for the better part of an hour now. Drawing a deep breath, she zeroed in on the man who had worked his way to the front of the microphone.

"Just so I can be sure to explain this correctly to my readers, in a nutshell, what are you saying about the pharmaceutical companies?"

"I'm not saying anything about the companies," she reiterated. "What I said, in a nutshell, is drugs are Band-Aids. They do not address the cause of disease. We are barking up the wrong tree. We have to step into a new paradigm. We have to think outside the box. That's all I'm saying for now."

"But— "

"I believe you're out of questions," she said, her brows raised. She smiled at the man standing behind him. "You had a question?"

"Could you address diabetes?"

"I can, and this will be the last question."

A groan went up.

Jeffy smiled sweetly. "Now, as I stated earlier about diabetes, most of

the things we have diabetics do to treat their illness are the things that perpetuate the disease."

Cam worked his way in front of the man with the question about the pharmaceutical companies and snapped off a few pics. He was the eleventh person Cam felt was a person of interest. Cam rattled off the man's name into his mic and continued to circle the room. Within a few minutes, the other agents, other members of Jason's Elite, would know whether to detain those Cam had singled out. He turned his attention back to Jeffy as she spoke about diabetes.

Conscious of reporters and television cameras, she'd given a perfectly rousing and intimidating speech to the medical community. She'd praised their efforts, led them to believe they were thinking like herself and on her side and made it clear that eventually there would be a clean sweep of all the ridiculous rhetoric. She did it so sweetly and so succinctly, yet she made the world feel as if they were all co-conspirators with her.

Once she'd turned the time over for questions, Cam became very busy. The very first question came from a man in the front row. "So are you saying that you've been working on your research this entire last year?"

Jeffy denied doing any research in any of her labs. Cleverly, she led everyone to believe that she'd merely had lots of time for soul searching and to clear her mind as to how to go about some things. If the little speech she'd made tonight alarmed her enemies, they would know soon enough. This time, however, the family and close friends were on the highest level of security alert.

Cam's eyes narrowed as he saw Dr. Munna speak briefly to Mr. Ormandi, who then turned quickly to leave the room. Jeffy had just finished her lecture and was shaking hands and mingling with a few of the hobnobs present. Munna approached her. Jeffy smiled at him, nodded, patted his shoulder kindly. Munna nodded and moved away, approached the bar and ordered a drink. Cam had checked out Dr. Munna months ago, still, his behavior warranted another look. He keyed his mic. "Tony, do me a favor and keep an eye on Munna at the bar. I want to know his every move."

"Will do," Tony replied.

Cam gave Jeffy only another few minutes for questions before he lifted his arm, pointed at his watch. Immediately, Agents Coley and Akins closed rank around Jeffy.

"Time to get on the road, Dr. Kino," Coley said softly.

Jeffy nodded. She was only too glad to get back to the camp. "Good. I am so ready to get out of here. I'm not feeling very well."

Both agents were immediately alarmed. Coley bent down, peered into

her eyes. "What's wrong? Did you drink or eat anything that we didn't give to you?"

"No. I was a good girl. I just have a headache. I think I'm a little dehydrated. But," she paused, looked around. "There is something else. I don't know. I just want to get back to camp."

"The jeeps are being brought around now and the rest of our party is being notified to head toward the front entrance. The chopper is only twenty minutes away," Agent Akins stated.

"Thank goodness for that," Jeffy said as she brought her hand up to press against her forehead. "Hart, would you mind getting me a bottle of water?"

"Headache getting worse?"

"Not even sure I can call it a headache. It's like a pressure in my head. Like I'm under water. Very strange."

Agent Akins ran to do her bidding as Agent Coley helped her toward the entrance. She suddenly turned toward the agent. "Chris? Are you okay?"

He smiled at her. "You're always worrying about everyone else. I'm fine. You just get yourself feeling better."

The large drive in front of the hotel was filled with taxis, jeeps, trucks, limos. In only a few minutes Jeffy was ushered into one of the jeeps. Coley took the wheel, Akins sat shotgun, and Jeffy and Dr. Todd sat in the back.

The second jeep was driven by Gretchen, with nurse Ada right beside her, as usual. In the back seat was Donald McTalley. The seat beside McTalley had been occupied by Dr. Munna on the drive in. It was now empty.

Cam and another agent occupied a third vehicle which followed, just out of sight. It would take them only fifteen minutes to get to the heliport and he would breathe a little easier once he saw Jeffy off on the chopper.

As they pulled away from the hotel, Jeffy drank water and chatted with Dr. Todd.

"I have to say, June, you were impressive tonight."

Jeffy smiled at him. "Thank you, Richard." She really didn't feel much like talking, but decided it would be a distraction to the uneasiness she was feeling. "So tell me," she said idly, "what was it that impressed you so much?"

"Well," he said, stretching his arm out around her and leaning close. "It seems the little genius is not only book smart, you're people smart too. You had everyone eating out of your hands."

Jeffy gave a soft laugh. "I appreciate the compliment, but the people

smart part comes from my family, not me. They're the pros at working the crowd and saying just the right thing."

"Are you saying they helped you write your speech?"

"Oh, absolutely. I need all the help I can get. I'm walking a very thin rope, Richard. If I say or do the wrong thing, I could hurt a lot of people. Instead of helping to save lives, I could push the medical world back twenty years. I have to play it just right and socially, I'm a little backward."

"You're kidding?"

"No. I'm quite serious. I had a hard time making friends when I was young. I mean, while other little girls were playing with Barbies, I was contemplating physics. I found it almost impossible to focus on a little plastic doll and play make-believe. My make believe involved traveling through the universe at one hundred times the speed of light, or pretending I had the power to use my mind to heal someone."

"How sad."

"No. I wasn't sad at all. My parents and siblings taught me to find joy in every moment. I was filled with joy. I still am. All I'm saying is I've struggled with relationships. Only a few very understanding people outside of my family have stood beside me while I was being an annoying nerd, like my best friends, Kimmie and Marissa. It's funny, actually. I've studied and understood the psychology of man, but in real situations, I'm a bit awkward."

"And how about boyfriends? Did you have many?"

"No. Just one to speak of."

"And?"

"And I don't want to talk about him."

"Aww, I see. He broke your heart."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. It's all over your face."

"Well, my father will not be happy that I am so easily read."

Richard laughed. "So, your family helped you to write your speech?"

"They helped me to decide how much information to give and how gently to deliver that information. They helped me to put together the exact way I need to present my findings to the world so that psychologically, the world will be ready and willing to hear what I have to say."

"And what is it you have to say?"

Jeffy shook her head with a grin. "Oh, no. You'll have to wait like everyone else."

He chuckled. "Why did I know you were gonna say th— "

It all happened so fast. A shot rang out. Agent Coley grunted and

slumped over. Jeffy screamed. Agent Akins grabbed for the wheel but it was too late. The jeep ran off the road and flipped on its side. Jeffy felt her body go airborne, felt the pain as she hit the dirt and rolled to a stop.

Chris. I have to get to Chris, Jeffy thought frantically, willing her body to move. For some reason, she couldn't see where she was going. "Chris! I can't find you." She was crawling on her belly across gravel and dirt. "Chris!"

She felt arms wrap around her, pulling her across the dirt and then a warm body covered hers.

"Chris! I have to help him," she cried.

"Shh, now. It's me. It's Hart. Listen to me, Jeffy, Chris is right here. Dr. Todd is working on him."

"Richard is working on him? Then Richard is okay?"

"A little banged up is all," Richard answered.

"How bad is Chris? What's happening?"

"Chris is alive, but his lung is collapsed," Dr. Todd answered, breathing heavily as he worked on Agent Coley.

She wiped at her eyes. "I can't see. I need to see."

Hart lifted himself slightly away from her, peered down at her. "You hit your head, Jeffy. There's blood running down your forehead into your eyes." He reached down, grabbed the hem of her evening gown, pulled it up and used it to wipe her face and eyes.

Jeffy blinked, struggled to get out from under the man. "Get off me, Hart. I have to help Chris."

"I told you, Dr. Todd is working on him, now be still," he said, pressing his body against her as shots were fired, hitting in the wooded area just past them.

Jeffy realized they were crouched down behind the upturned jeep. She tensed as Hart raised up away from her, squeezed off a couple of shots and lowered himself back down on top of her. She pushed against him. "Let me help you. I can help."

Hart held her still. "Jeffy, there's nothing you can do to help right now except to just be still and let me do my freakin' job," he said crossly. He put a finger to his earpiece.

"Roger that."

"Who are you talking to?" Jeffy asked.

"Another agent. They were following in a third vehicle."

Jeffy gasped as she suddenly remembered her friends in the second jeep. "Oh, Gretchen! Ada! Are they okay? Mc-T?"

"They're okay. One of the agents from the third car is with them.

They've taken cover on the side of their vehicle."

"Thank goodness Dr. Munna stayed behind."

"Yeah, right. I wonder why he did."

"I suggested that he stay and get some rest at the hotel for a few days. He's been a little out of sorts."

"You told him to stay? It wasn't his idea?"

"Correct. Why?"

When he didn't answer, she put two and two together. "You think he planned this ambush?"

"It crossed my mind."

"No, it wasn't him. I know."

"Well, I can guarantee Jason will be looking into it."

Jeffy tried to turn around but Hart held her still. "I'm so worried about Chris. Richard? How bad is he?"

"Hard to tell. He's losing a lot of blood."

She pushed against Hart. "Let me up!"

"No freaking way, Jeffy, now be still."

"I thought you guys were wearing vests."

"We are."

"The bullet entered just under his left arm," Richard said, grunting as he pulled his own shirt off to use to help staunch the flow of blood.

"So what are we gonna do?" Jeffy cried. "Just hide here behind the jeep and hope they run out of bullets while Chris bleeds to death?"

"No. One of the other agents has moved into the woods to take care of the problem."

"One? How many gunmen are there?"

"I'm guessing four."

"What makes you think that?"

"I can see fire from at least two, but they're not trying to hit us."

"Not trying? Chris is hit!" she screamed.

"They meant to hit him to stop us. All the other fire is going high, over our heads and hitting in the woods behind us. That means they're trying to keep us pinned down so that at least one more bad guy can make his way to us, but I think he wouldn't work alone, so I say there are two more. That makes four."

"And the guys making their way to us? What do they intend to do to us?"

"They think they can just walk in here and take me out and take you away. In other words, Jeffy, they want you alive."

Jeffy thought a moment. "Well, then, let me up. If I go with them, they

won't hurt you and we can get Chris to a hospital."

"I'm not letting you up, Jeffy. They can't have you. I said they *think* they can take me out. They can't. I will protect you with my life."

"I'm ordering you to get off me," she cried.

"I don't take my orders from you," he growled. "Now be quiet so I can hear what the agent who went in might need me to do."

"One guy—you're letting one guy go looking for four assassins?"

"Well, he's not just any guy. He's very good at what he does."

At that moment a cry of pain filled the jungle.

"Oh, no! Now what, huh, Hart?"

"That wasn't him."

They heard a rifle fire, then two more quick shots and another cry.

Hart stilled as he listened to the message coming through his earpiece. He nodded. "Roger, C– uh, that, Scott." He lifted his body off Jeffy. "Come on, let's go."

The second jeep pulled up to them, driven by the agent who had been with Cam. Hart lifted Jeffy and tossed her into the now cramped vehicle, then turned to help Dr. Todd lift Agent Coley into the jeep.

"Go, go, go," Hart yelled.

Just two miles down the road the group was loaded into the chopper. Jeffy finally got a good look at Chris who now was being worked on by three extremely brilliant doctors. She wanted to help, but for some reason, it seemed like no one could hear anything she was trying to say. Just before they lifted into the air, she saw the agent who'd driven the jeep the last few miles, turn the jeep around and head back out. She figured he was going to see about the agent who'd so bravely gone into the woods and apparently taken out the gunmen.

She looked up toward the pilot who was talking rapidly. Her eyes darted back to Chris who was being stripped. The doctors working on him seemed to be moving in fast forward. She turned her head to find Hart. He was smiling, nodding at her, pushing her down. Unable to resist, she let her body fall backward. Jeffy blinked several times and focused in on Ada's face, which appeared to be floating over her. Ada was speaking to her, but Jeffy couldn't hear her words. Jeffy's stomach began to heave and she couldn't keep the contents from rising. Her field of vision narrowed, turning gray around the edges, then bright white, and finally black.

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"Wake up for me now," Gretchen was saying softly.

Jeffy felt a cool cloth on her forehead. She moaned as she tried to move and stretch her sore muscles. Her eyes blinked open to see Gretchen's

beautiful smiling face.

"There now, Jeffy, how are you feeling?"

Jeffy moaned. "I feel like I've been thrown through the air like a human missile."

"Uh, that's because you have," she said with a chuckle. "You hit your head pretty hard. You have a concussion, but you're gonna be okay. You just need to take it easy for a few days."

She blinked as she took in the information, then gasped suddenly. "Chris? Is he okay?"

"He's gonna make it. We left him in the hospital in Kampala."

"Alone?"

"No, he's not alone," Agent Akins said from somewhere behind Gretchen.

"How bad is he?" Jeffy asked.

"The bullet entered and exited his left lung, nicked his right lung and exited through his back," Gretchen answered. "Right now he's experiencing a small degree of paralysis from pressure on the T— "

"No, oh no," Jeffy cried.

"Pressure on the T8, BUT, we don't expect this to be permanent," Gretchen continued. "The spinal cord was not severed. It wasn't actually touched. Thankfully the bullet missed it but grazed the vertebra which caused some swelling of the cord."

Jeffy couldn't stop the tears from flowing.

"Jeffy, you know as well as I that this type of paralysis doesn't have to be permanent. He's gonna be okay. He's gonna be good as new," Gretchen said.

"H- Hart," Jeffy blubbered, reaching out her hand.

He came to her, took her hand.

She looked into his eyes and could tell he too was as upset and worried. She had to pull herself together for his sake. "What he must be going through. What he must be thinking. Hart, I need to see him."

He swallowed hard. "I know how you're feeling, Jeffy. I feel the same way, but you can't travel for three days and by then, he will be back in the states."

"I can travel."

"No. You can't," both Gretchen and Hart said at the same time.

"You have a severe concussion and you're not going anywhere or doing anything for three days."

"And after that," Hart chimed in. "You're leaving."

"Leaving?"

"You're being extracted."

"Extracted."

"Yes. Your father and Jason say they have seen enough. The moment you even suggested you were thinking about going back to your research, someone tried to take you out. They want you home where they can keep you safe."

"You said yourself they didn't try to take me out. They wanted me alive, for whatever reason."

"You are being extracted," Hart said sternly.

"I can't leave. Not yet. I'm scheduled to put together two more medical facilities over the next six months."

"You don't have to be present to have that happen and you know it. Now, I don't want any trouble from you, Jeffy. You're leaving."

Frowning, she eyed him. His brown hair was neatly trimmed. His handsome features strong and chiseled. His mouth was set in a straight line. His body was like all the other Ameritech agents, honed with muscle. He'd used his body as a human shield last night to protect her. She hadn't been able to push him off her and if he wanted her to leave, she probably wouldn't be able to fight him on it. He was upset and cross and she couldn't blame him. Still, there was no way she could leave. Mirembe needed her. Jeffy realized that she had to employ some of that people smart she'd told Richard she didn't have. She drew a deep, calming breath.

"Okay, Hart, I understand and I'm not gonna give you any trouble on this. I'll go, but I need a small compromise. I gave my word to Mirembe that I would be here to see her twins safely born."

"Will they be born within the next few days?"

She sighed, picking her words carefully. "Well, actually, they could be. She's seven and a half months along. We don't expect her to go past eight months, so she's only a few weeks away from delivering. That's all I'm asking for. Two weeks."

Hart rolled his eyes. "It's not my decision, Jeffy. You present your case to your father and see what he has to say about it, but if it were up to me, I'd get you out of here as quickly as possible."

Jeffy frowned. "Well, it's not up to you now, is it?"

"Nope. Still, my opinion will be given to your father."

"You'd want me to break my word?"

"Mirembe will understand. Your life is important."

She blew out a breath. Of course she knew that. Really though, once she published her series of text books, there would be no stopping the medical revolution that would take place. So it wasn't as if silencing her would do

anyone any good. All the info for those books was already backed up and held by her family. Her life wasn't that important and as soon as the world realized that, the danger to herself would be over. Unless they just wanted her dead for spite. Which was entirely possible. For now, she just wanted to keep her word to a special friend.

"Jeffy," Gretchen said. "If Mirembe's babies don't come before you leave I promise you, Richard and I will take special care of them."

Jeffy sighed. Nodded. "Richard, how is he? Was he hurt at all?"

"He's okay. He has some cuts and abrasions. He came in earlier to check on you but I talked him into getting some rest. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to examine you," she added, glancing at Agent Akins.

"Oh, I'll, uh, be outside," he said quickly.

Jeffy obliged Gretchen and lay still while the doctor checked her pupils, listened to her heart, palpated her abdomen and gently probed the large knot on the right side of Jeffy's head. Satisfied that her patient was on the mend, Gretchen left her with an admonition to rest.

The moment she left, Jeffy struggled to a sitting position and called Hart to her. He came back in and approached the cot where she lay, a frown on his face. She reached out and took his hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, the tears welling in her eyes. "It's my fault Chris is hurt and I'm so sorry."

Hart's expression softened. "Jeffy, it's not your fault. It's our job. We expect to face danger every single day. We don't have to be here. We wanted to be here. We wanted this assignment and both of us have had the opportunity to go in and have replacements, but we elected to stay. Look, I'm sorry too. I'm sorry I wasn't the one driving. I'm sorry I didn't see it coming. I'm sorry you were hurt. Chris would say the same thing. He's gonna be okay, Jeffy. I have to believe that. Besides, isn't it you who is always preaching the positive thinking thing?"

She sniffed, gave a soft laugh. "Yes. But— "

"No buts. Either do it or don't do it. That's what you say."

"Okay. No buts. Chris is gonna be fine. He's gonna make a complete and speedy recovery, in Jesus' name. So there, it's done. That's that."

Hart smiled. "That's that."

"So it's just you and me for now."

Hart shrugged. "In a manner of speaking."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, there are other agents around."

"Oh, yes. The third car. Are they okay? How is the agent who went in and stopped the gunmen?"

"He's fine."

"No scratches?"

"Not a one."

"Hmm. He must be very good."

"He is. He's Jason's Elite, actually the first one, I mean, after Agent Adams, Agent Davis, Agent Tanner and the few others who put the program together."

Her eyes opened wide. "Really? Well, he must be good because he worked very fast."

Hart chuckled. "Ya think? I guess he figured there was no time to waste," Hart said sarcastically.

Jeffy shrugged. "I guess there wasn't."

"Right. Oh, and he brought your pack to you early this morning."

"He did? I figured that was lost forever. Good. I was about to ask you if I might use your phone. Now I'll just ask if you could bring mine to me."

Hart lifted the lid to her small trunk and pulled her backpack out and handed it to Jeffy. She fished inside for her phone, and immediately dialed her father.

"Jeffy?" Eric said when he answered.

"Yes, Daddy, it's me."

"Thank God you're alright."

She smiled when she heard a feminine squeal in the background.

"And your mom says the same and wants to speak to you."

Jeffy laughed. "I'm sure she does. Okay, but first, I want to tell you that I need to stay here a little longer."

"I'd rather you not," he said firmly.

"I know, but, remember the family I told you about? I gave my word to Mirembe that I would be here when her babies are born. It will only be a few more weeks. Can I please stay until then?"

"If I said 'yes' your mother would skin me alive. Explain the situation to Mirembe. I'm sure she'll understand. As soon as you're recovered enough to travel I'm pulling you. Now, that is my decision and no pleading on your part will make me change my mind. Still, I realize you're an adult and have the freedom to do whatever you choose. However, let me remind you, that we are a family and we are all in this together and the entire family feels the way I do. We want you safe. Although I understand the giving of your word, you must set priorities. Circumstances have changed since the giving of your word. You need to adjust."

Jeffy sat silently contemplating her father's words. He was a wise man to whom she'd always shown respect and obedience. He felt strongly that

she should come home.

"Are you still there, baby girl?"

"Yes, Daddy. I'm here. Okay. I'll come home. Still, I might need an extra day or two once I'm able to move around, so that I can make some arrangements and pack up my belongings."

"A day. Nothing you have there is worth your life."

She blew out an exasperated breath. "Okay, a day."

"That's my girl. Love you, sweetheart."

"Love you, Daddy."

"Here's your mother."

"Jeffy?"

"Hey Mom!"

"I've been so worried."

"I'm okay. Really."

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"No. Not now. I'm pretty tired. It was scary and I'm just sick over Chris being shot."

"He's gonna be okay."

"Yes, he is," Jeffy said, smiling at Hart.

"Well, if you want to talk, call. It doesn't matter what time it is."

"I will, Mom. Give my love to everyone."

"I will."

"And keep everyone safe," Jeffy implored, her voice choking on the emotion that suddenly welled up.

"We will. Don't worry. Baby, are you okay?"

Jeffy sniffed back tears. "I bet you never thought when you were giving birth to me that one day this little baby is gonna put your entire family in jeopardy."

"Oh, sweetheart, that's not how it is. When I held you in my arms for the first time I knew that you came into this world for a very special reason. It's not your fault that greedy, horrible people are trying to stop you. We have to place the responsibility on their shoulders. Not yours. You got that?"

Jeffy wiped the tears from her eyes. "Guess I just needed to be reassured that you're not mad at me for bringing all this on you."

"Never Jeffy."

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, baby. Please be careful."

"Will do. Bye, Mom."

Jeffy glanced up at Hart who'd been standing close by. He took the

phone from her hand when she held it out to him.

"You okay?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Don't know why I feel so emotional."

He moved close. When her chin began to tremble he wrapped his arms around her, pulled her against his chest and let her cry it out.

❁

Three days later, while the children were at school in the village, Jeffy stood next to Mirembe, holding her hand as Dr. Todd examined her. Earlier that morning Jeffy had been given a clean bill of health and an 'okay' to travel. She'd immediately asked Richard if he would check out Mirembe and the babies, to see if her time was close.

"She's already four centimeters dilated," he said as he used his other hand to press gently down on Mirembe's swollen abdomen.

Mirembe gave a soft moan. She'd been having fairly strong contractions ever since Jeffy had returned from Kampala, but nothing regular. Jeffy just knew she would be able to see the babies born after all. An ultrasound had determined that they were healthy, well-formed baby boys who shared the placenta, both heads down, one slightly lower than the other.

Mirembe had been placed on bed rest more than two weeks ago when she'd tried to move a table at the school and had experienced some pain and some minor bleeding. They'd talked her into coming to the camp and placed her, Sanyu and Balon in their own little tent at the far end of the compound, closest to Dr. Todd. The new clinic was now open, up and running and when her time came she would be just two minutes away from it.

Richard placed his hand on her belly. "Do you feel any pain?"

Mirembe shook her head. "Not really. Nothing difficult. I feel uncomfortable," she said slowly in her thick accent.

Jeffy eyed Dr. Todd. She waited until he finished his exam and walked outside with him. Agent Akins, who'd been standing outside the tent, moved a few feet away in an effort to be discreet.

"Is something wrong?"

"Birthing twins is always difficult," Richard said. "I think she may be going into labor."

"And that's a bad thing right now, isn't it?"

Dr. Todd nodded. "Emotionally for her, it would be good to have it over with before you leave in the morning. However, physically, I'd like her to carry them a few more weeks."

Jeffy nodded. "Continue."

"She's thirty-three weeks, four weeks earlier than I would like but the

tests and ultrasounds show small but healthy boys with good lung development. Let's keep our fingers crossed. I'm gonna administer magnesium sulfate and see if I can keep her comfortable and keep her from having contractions for a few more weeks, and then when the time comes, I think I'd like to airlift her to a hospital, for advanced neonatal support. I don't want to take any chances."

Jeffy nodded. "Thank you for that. I can't be here and I feel just sick about that but I can make sure you have everything you need to bring these babies safely into the world. Give it to me straight, Richard. Do you believe she's gonna be okay?"

"I do. She's strong, she's healthy, she's followed the diet. She's taken care of herself, except for trying to lift the table at the school."

Jeffy nodded. "Okay, then, you're the expert. I guess I'll leave her in your good hands."

Dr. Todd put his arm around Jeffy. "I know this hurts."

Jeffy bit her lip to keep it from trembling. "I promised her."

"June, she understands. She actually told me to tell you that if you don't go and be safe then she will not come to see you in America in the fall as planned."

"Oh really," Jeffy said sarcastically.

Richard smiled at her. "Really, that is exactly what she said."

"I did say that," Mirembe called from inside the tent.

Grinning, Jeffy turned and went back inside, arms outstretched. "One more hug."

Mirembe obliged her. "I will see you in just a few months with my fat little boys."

"I can't wait," Jeffy said.

"I want a hug, I want a hug!" Sanyu cried as she came running in.

Jeffy turned, held her hands out. "Oh, no. I'm not leaving until the morning. I don't want to say goodbye to you until then."

When Sanyu stopped and placed her hands on her hips, Jeffy scooped her up in a great big hug and spun her around. "Okay, one hug now. In the morning, bunches."

Setting her down, she turned to Balon. "My love," she said softly.

Balon nodded solemnly. He'd been subdued ever since he'd learned of Agent Coley being shot.

Jeffy smiled at him. "I suppose you want a hug too."

He shook his head. "I will wait until morning," he said soberly.

Jeffy knelt down in front of him, placed her hand on his head and leaned her forehead against his. She stayed that way for several moments,

using her psychic abilities to do what her brothers termed, her "Vulcan mind melding trick." She not only had the ability to read minds with amazing accuracy, but she'd discovered several years ago that if she gave a mental push of love and healing, she was able to lift the spirits of her subject, though it had one little side effect, which was the taking on of their emotions into herself. When she pulled away from Balon, she had tears in her eyes, but it was worth it because Balon offered her a small smile.

Jeffy rose and Balon moved closer to Agent Akins, who placed his hand protectively around the boy's shoulders.

"Well, I guess I have a few more people that I'd like to see before I leave," she said brightly.

"What about me?" Richard asked.

"I'll see you in the morning."

Sighing, she made her way up the hill to the clinic to say her farewells to Gretchen, Dr. Mc-T, Ada and several others. Afterward she headed back through the compound, stopping in the mess tent to speak with some med students and interns. She'd been tempted to ride into the village to bid farewell to the dozens of friends she'd made over the past months, but her exit was not supposed to be common knowledge, and yet, by the time she got back to her tent, she found it full of little gifts.

Delighted, she sat on her cot and began going through some of the new treasures. Two necklaces of exquisite handmade beads, three dolls wearing the beautiful Ugandan dress, several pictures painstakingly drawn by children at the school on the highly valued paper with the crayons she herself had purchased for the children. Many fruits, a lovely orange robe with green trim. Notes, letters. Apparently she had touched their lives. She wondered if they realized just how much they had touched hers. She pulled out some paper and began writing a long letter to let them know just how she felt about all of them. By the time she finished, it was dinnertime.

Hart escorted her to the mess tent where she ate with some of the most heroic, wonderful people in the world—her fellow doctors, nurses, interns and college students. There were more hugs, more promises to write and stay in touch, more admonishments for her to stay safe and to keep on the 'golden path.'

Exhausted by the time she returned to her tent, she stretched out on her cot and closed her eyes. Even though it was because of greed and violence that she was having to leave, she felt peaceful and comforted by the love that had been shown to her over the course of the day.

Her mind wandered to the next day and her trip home and seeing her family again. She missed them more than words could describe. She had

two nieces that had just turned one that she'd seen only through a webcam. All of their faces drifted through her mind, her parents, Ricky and Bree and Eric and Taylor, Mark and Bella and their kids, JoJo and Logan and little Emily, Joey and Breez with Sophia and Kelstyn. She couldn't wait to be in their circle of love again.

Given her psychic abilities, she would later wonder why she never had an inkling that the next day's plans would never happen.

✞✞✞

Proverbs 16:9
"In their hearts humans plan their course,
but the Lord establishes their steps."

Chapter Five

It took a while for her to climb out of the deep sleep. The dreams had been disturbing, filled with blood and darkness and fear. Still, off in the distance, there had been a bright light and she kept heading towards it.

"Dr. Kino, please, wake up."

Jeffy blinked her eyes at the tiny voice in her ear. Consciousness came and she bolted upright, gasping. "What's wrong?"

Balon and Sanyu both stood next to her cot. Hart stood over her, his hand on her shoulder.

"It's Ma-ma," Balon said. "Dr. Todd said to come get you. You must come quickly. Please."

Jeffy jumped from her cot. "The babies are coming? Let me get my clothes."

Hart stepped out and closed the flap. The children stood silently as she dressed. The moment she tied her second boot she grabbed their hands. "Let's go."

The four of them ran quickly through the camp to the far end of the compound where Mirembe and her family were being housed. Jeffy wondered why Richard hadn't gone ahead and taken Mirembe on up to the clinic. She got her answer the moment she entered the tent.

It was like a scene from a horror movie. Dr. Todd and Dr. Hall stood over Mirembe's body. Their gloved hands were covered in blood as were the front of their scrubs. Mirembe's eyes were open, staring lifelessly upward. She lay in a pool of blood. Yet the most horrible sight was the gaping hole in Mirembe's lower belly and the two lifeless babies lying side by side on their mother's abdomen.

Jeffy covered her mouth to stifle the cry that came immediately to her lips. The doctors turned slowly to look at her. Gretchen was crying as she shook her head. Richard's face reflected utter devastation. The whole scene was surreal.

"Dear Lord Jesus," Hart muttered behind her, which brought Jeffy back to the reality of the situation.

She turned quickly, trying to block the children's view. "Balon, I need you to do something for me. I need you to take Sanyu back to my tent and stay there with her."

"But— "

"Balon. This is very important. Do you understand?"

Balon's large brown eyes blinked hard. "Yes, ma'am. I understand. I understand everything."

Jeffy watched as one tear fell down his cheek. Closing her eyes briefly, she leaned close. "Don't worry, my love. I know it doesn't seem so, but somehow, everything will be alright," she whispered, then pulled away.

"Take Sanyu. Stay there until I come for you. You may sleep in my bed. You may turn on my computer like I showed you and play the games. Just– just stay there. Will you obey me?"

Balon nodded quietly. He knows, Jeffy thought. He knows his mother is dead.

"I want to play on the computer first," Sanyu said brightly.

"That's fine," Jeffy answered. "Now go you two." She glanced at Hart. "I guess I can't talk you into going with them?"

"Sorry. I don't leave your side."

Jeffy turned back toward Mirembe. The tears were already streaming down her face. "What happened?" she cried.

Dr. Todd shook his head. "Balon came to get me. He said his mother wouldn't wake up. He said he thought he heard her voice so he got up to see if she would like some water. When she didn't respond to him, he pulled on her hand. She wouldn't wake up because she was already dead."

"What went wrong?" Jeffy sobbed.

"It looks like placental abruption. She was still warm. I detected a fetal heartbeat and thought maybe we could save the babies. Gretchen was on her way back from checking on a patient at the clinic and I called her over."

"We tried to save them," Gretchen said softly. "Richard performed a Caesarean, but we were too late. We tried to resuscitate them. We tr..." Her voice broke.

Jeffy shook her head in disbelief. For the first time in her life she was completely speechless. Her eyes jumped from the doctors to the dead babies to Mirembe's face. How was she gonna deal with this? How could she leave the children now? She couldn't. She would bring them wi...

The explosion almost knocked her off her feet. Hart tossed her to the floor, pulled his gun and went out. Jeffy was back on her feet and right

behind him. The blast sounded as if it came from the other side of the compound. The side where her tent was.

"The children!" Jeffy screamed. "The children!" She took off.

She ran blindly, the terror mounting in her chest until she could barely breathe. She wasn't thinking about anything other than getting to the children. People were running helter-skelter. She could hear shots being fired. A man in camo stepped out in front of her. She started to scream but he clapped his hand over her mouth.

He pulled her between two tents and into a copse of trees as she kicked and fought with all her might. She tried every trick she knew but he seemed to anticipate everything. He twisted to block a groin kick with his thigh, and wrestled her around in his arms so he could see her face to face.

"Stop it," he hissed. "Be still."

"Let me go," she grunted as she tried to break his hold on her.

She succeeded in getting her foot behind his and they tumbled to the ground.

She fought like a wild cat, scratching, biting. She went for his throat, his eyes.

"Stop it, Jeffy. Be still. It's me."

She landed a right hook and he grunted.

He grabbed her by the front of her shirt and shook her. "Jeffy! Stop! It's me."

The familiar voice finally reached inside her, forcing her to calm down and look up at his face.

"Cam?" she whispered.

"Yes, Jeffy, it's me. You have to come with me."

"What? What are you talking about? What are you doing here?" she cried, her voice on the edge of hysteria.

"I'll explain later. You have to come with me. Now!"

"I can't come with you. I have to get to the children."

"You can't, Jeffy. You have to come now."

"I'm not going anywhere without the children!" she screamed.

"You have to."

"No! Let me go. I have to help them."

She began fighting again. She knew all the moves and she was difficult to subdue. He shook her hard. "Jeffy! Listen to me. The children are gone."

"No!"

"Yes, Jeffy. I'm sorry but they're gone. There was a bomb. Everything that was in your tent is gone. The children are gone."

"No," she cried, as huge sobs welled up in her chest. "No. I must be

dreaming. This is a nightmare. I just need to wake up."

"It's no dream. You're awake and the children are gone." He stroked her face. "Come on now, Jeffy, we have to get out of here."

Jeffy shook her head. "Mirembe is dead. The babies are dead. I have to get the children."

Cam looked at her closely. She was going into shock. Shutting down. Unfortunately there was no time to stop and comfort her. Besides, commiserating would only make her give in to her grief. "We have to go," he said firmly.

He started to get to his feet but stopped when he heard footsteps and realized it was the bad guys, searching for her. They must've already discovered that she wasn't in her tent.

Watching from their place of cover he counted at least twenty of them, maybe more—guerrillas dressed as if they were Ugandan military, though Cam knew they were not military. They were mercenaries. They were searching the area, looking for the prize, and the prize was Jeffy. They were too close now, too close for Cam and Jeffy to run without being seen.

"What's happening?"

Cam slapped his hand over her mouth and quickly pulled her deeper into the trees, backing his way under some low-lying brush. He covered her body with his and placed his mouth close to her ear. "Don't move. Don't talk."

Surprisingly, she complied, a fact for which he was extremely grateful. The group moved through, smacking bushes with their rifles, cursing in several languages which told Cam he was right, they were not Ugandan military. It seemed like forever before they moved on, heading in the direction of the village.

"When I say 'go' we're gonna stand up and run," he whispered. "That way, into the jungle."

When she didn't answer, he went on. "You won't be able to see where we're going. Just don't let go of my hand and you'll be okay. You have to trust me."

Again, she didn't answer but she also didn't protest so he figured that was a good sign. He eased off her, took her hand and pulled her to her feet. Quickly, he removed the night-vision goggles from his belt. And froze.

"Dammit."

Two straggler mercenaries came out of nowhere. "Well, well, well, what have we here?" one said in what Jeffy identified as Russian.

"Radio Zack and tell them we have her," the other answered.

Her mouth dropped open when Cam spoke to them in the same

language.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"And why not?" the first one asked.

"Because I'd have to kill you. Put your weapons down and sit with your backs against the tree and I'll let you live."

The two men looked at each other. One chuckled. The other brought the radio to his mouth.

Cam moved so fast it took a second for Jeffy to realize what was happening. Like something out of a Jason Bourne movie, Cam spun in a blur of motion and when he stopped two men lay dead on the ground.

Jeffy stood frozen, her eyes wide with disbelief. Almost nonchalantly, Cam sheathed a knife she'd never seen him pull and put on the night goggles. He nodded toward her, held his hand out to her. The moment she placed her hand in his he took off, running at a fast clip toward the heart of the central Ugandan wilderness.

They'd run 3.2 miles when Cam finally came to a halt. He knew it was exactly 3.2 because his route was part of a contingency plan in case something happened to bar Jeffy's extraction in the morning. Well, something had definitely happened.

He leaned her against a tree, took a water canteen from a strap that crossed his chest. "Here, take some."

Jeffy obediently sipped the water. She'd made no sound the entire time except for breathing heavily. He got her to drink a few more swallows, took some for himself and recapped the bottle.

"Next stop is two more miles. Can you make it?"

She didn't answer. He took her by the shoulders. "Look, Jeffy, I know you're hurting. I know this is hard and I know you don't understand, but I'm asking you to focus and to trust me based on all you once knew about me. I'm gonna get you home to your family. We really can't stop now. We have a lot of ground to cover, but, I also don't want, like, your heart to explode or something, so I need to know, can you make it a few more miles before we rest again?"

She blinked. "I, I need to empty my bladder."

He moved away, plucked two large leaves from some foliage and brought them to her. He handed her the leaves, drew his knife and handed it to her as well. "Go no more than six paces in that direction. Dig a small hole. When you're finished, put the leaves in the hole and fill the hole with dirt."

She looked down at the leaves and the knife, then back up at him. The knife was the one he'd just used to kill two men. She started to protest, then

thought better of it and without a word, turned and walked in the direction he'd pointed.

Cam turned his back and waited for her. When she approached him, he turned to face her, took back his knife and looked her in the eyes. "Ready?"

She nodded.

He took her hand and ran. They covered the two miles in a relatively short period of time. He stopped suddenly, sat Jeffy down on a rock. "Stay here." He disappeared behind some trees. A few minutes later he emerged with two backpacks. One large and fully loaded. The other one he held out to Jeffy.

"You have a steel water bottle in the side pocket there," he said as he pointed. "Those are night vision goggles there," he added taking them from a strap on top. She took them from him and put them on.

"Inside is a change of clothing and some personal items. Toothbrush, small towel, camp soap, protein bars, knife and a small first aid kit. We have a bit farther to go before we can rest, but we can walk now. Let me help you get this on." He moved forward, but stopped when she backed away and slung the pack over her shoulder and onto her back herself.

He nodded. That was a clue that she was more than grief-stricken. She was also mad. Good. Right now mad would help get her through. He removed his smaller original pack, attached it to the larger one and heaved it onto his back. Once he was set, he flipped down his goggles. "This way. Stay close."



"Why can't I get someone to work for me who is not a total idiot?"

The words were not spoken in anger. Dr. Black merely shook his head in genuine wonder.

Lanske shrugged. "I told you, Dr. Black, you want quality, you gotta pay for it."

Black waved his hand. "Fine. Do what you need to do. Hire whatever underlings you need to hire. I want this girl. Now, because your men failed, our rivals have taken another shot at her. I'm happy to report that we believe they have also failed once again."

"You believe?"

"They put a bomb in her tent, but word is that she wasn't there when it went off. Still, no one has been able to locate her. It's as if she's disappeared into thin air."

"Then possibly the bomb did succeed," Payne Lanske mumbled.

"Possibly, though there would have been some trace of her remains. No, I believe she made it out and is hiding somewhere. See what you can find

from her family. If they are in an uproar, then maybe she is dead. If they are calm, then they know she is alive and are probably working to get her back to the US, and, if the latter is true, then they will be sending a jet, or helicopter or boat, after all, she certainly can't walk across the ocean. So we will need to send men to airstrips, harbors, you get the picture."

"Yes," Lanske said. "I get it. I'll get right on it."

"Good. I want her found before the other guys kill her. Loksalle is a moron. How he could think to simply destroy such a work of art is beyond me. She is so precious. Did you read the transcript of her remarks at that Kampala hotel? Brilliant. The girl is brilliant. And her brilliant mind will recognize another brilliant mind and together, she will see that we can make amazing strides without having to topple our domain. I'll explain to her the correct way to accomplish her goals. Together we will be unstoppable."

"Together," Payne said, trying very hard not to roll his eyes at the man with the money.

"Yes, together. When we are married."

"Married? You believe you can get her to marry you?"

"She will see the light one way or another."

Payne Lanske said nothing more because it was not advisable to argue with insanity.

Dr. Black drew a deep breath. Shrugged. "If she refuses to marry me, then I will simply hold her hostage until I can impregnate her and she gives birth to my child."

"And then you will simply let her go? She would destroy you, or her family will."

He sighed. "I'd hate to lose something so beautiful, but I suppose, in order to protect the child, I'd have to put June Flower Kino down," he said as if she were a thoroughbred racehorse. He shook his head. "But, let's not speculate and let's not underestimate the power of motherhood. I believe she would do anything for her child."

Payne nodded. He didn't say what he thought, which was that Dr. Black, albeit genius and filthy rich, was Loony tunes. He was a man with a schoolboy crush on a beautiful young girl and had decided to use his power to obtain her and had rationalized it away in his fat brain as saving the world, so that he did not feel guilty about what he was doing. Oh, well—as long as Black continued to pay him millions of dollars to do his dirty work, he would keep right on doing it. Heaven knows what would happen if Payne actually succeeded in bringing the girl to him. If anything, it could be entertaining. Maybe Black will take advantage of Payne's

excellent skills to break her spirit.



It seemed to Jeffy that they had walked forever. Her usually strong body seemed to be shutting down. Maybe it was the fact she'd only had a few hours' sleep. More than likely it was the shock from current events. Just when she thought she couldn't take another step, Cam came to a halt. Jeffy watched him, wondering what he was up to now.

He was looking up into a gigantic tree and then bending, he reached behind the tree and pulled out a long stick as if he'd known it was there all along. Which, she reasoned, would mean that he did. Which would mean that he'd arranged all this ahead of time. It was mind boggling and she found she was having trouble putting it all together. So she stopped trying. She just stood there and watched Cam use the stick to probe some higher branches.

A second later his stick snagged something. He jerked his arm and one end of a thick rope fell down from the tree. The other end was attached to an upper branch. He turned, held out his hand. "Give me your pack."

She obliged and watched as he looped her pack over one arm and hauled himself up the rope like some circus acrobat.

"Don't move. I'll be right back."

She watched as he disappeared into the tree. Cameron Wallace. He was no longer the boy she'd fallen in love with ten years ago. The person who'd just climbed a rope up into a tree in the middle of the jungle in the middle of the night was hard, extremely confident, and as she'd seen earlier, lethal.

He'd been so sweet, so kind, when she'd first met him. A little goofy, which endeared him to her. When Senator Daley had pulled a "Snow White's momma," and ordered that horrible man Kurt, to take her into the forested mountains of Washington State and end her life, Cameron had followed, not knowing what he would do, only vowing to somehow save her. And he had. And then he'd become completely turned around and gotten them hopelessly lost in the wilderness.

She smiled. He'd apologized over and over that day, explaining how he'd always had a terrible sense of direction. Yet now, she'd actually followed him into the jungle in the middle of the night. The whole world has gone crazy.

With that thought came the unbidden pictures of what had transpired this night. Richard standing over Mirembe's bloody body, her two dead baby boys lying on her abdomen. The sad look in Balon's eyes when she sent him and his sister away so they wouldn't see such horror. She'd sent them to their deaths. Brave little Balondemu and happy, sunny little Sanyu.

They'd become more than just someone else's children she merely cared for. She'd given them her heart. And she'd sent them to their deaths. *Oh my God, I can't stand it.* Did they suffer? Was there pain? Is there even anything left of them to have a proper burial? Why? Why? Because of her. Because she thought to—

"Jeffy!"

She blinked, looked slowly up into Cam's chiseled face. He was standing in front of her, had her by the shoulders.

"Did you hear what I said?"

She shook her head.

"I said it's about three in the morning. We're gonna spend the rest of the night in this tree. I'm going up first and then I want you to wrap the rope around your waist like this," he said as he demonstrated. "And then press your feet against the tree to keep you from banging against the trunk. I'll pull you up, okay?"

She nodded.

"Speak to me, Jeffy. I need to know you understand."

"Yes. I understand," she said softly.

She watched as he climbed back up the rope.

"Okay," he called.

She wrapped the rope around her back, creating a swing and gasped as he immediately began pulling her up. She used her feet to keep from hitting the tree with her body. When she got to a branch about fifteen feet below where he was, he told her to stand and climb the rest of the way. In only a few minutes she was standing next to him. She started to remove the rope from her waist.

"No. Leave that on," he ordered. He motioned to the giant branch beside her. "Have a seat. I'll get you some water."

Obediently, she sat and sipped the water he handed her. He was breathing heavily and she realized how difficult it must have been for him to haul her up. He knelt next to her and pulled a rectangular package from his pack. Removing a small orange cap, he pressed a button and suddenly the rectangle unfolded and became what appeared to be a thin pad or mat. He laid the mat over two other branches that ran parallel to each other, each one about three feet wide. And she realized that this was her bed. Or rather, their bed.

He sat down on the far side of the mat, smiled at her, patted the space next to him. "Come here, Jeffy."

When she didn't move he frowned. "Look, I get that you're upset and probably angry with me. Like I said earlier, I'm gonna get you home to your

family. Right now, I need to rest and so do you, and I can't rest without knowing you're okay, and I won't know you're okay unless I can feel you lying here next to me, so, use that logical brain of yours and do what you need to do to help me help you. Got it?"

Without a word, she got up and moved to the remarkable little pad. She sat down carefully, testing her weight.

"I won't let you fall," he said.

He waited for her to lie down. The moment she did, he stretched out next to her and spooned her body.

She felt him move behind her and the next thing she knew, a light, airy cloth was pulled over her. She hadn't thought she'd be able to rest with so much going on in her brain, but the moment she sensed his warmth and his hardness behind her, she felt her body relax. Within minutes she was sound asleep.

Cam knew when she finally relaxed and fell asleep. He breathed a sigh of relief. It'd been a hard night and he was exhausted. They had a long way to go tomorrow. Hopefully 'plan B' would work out. For now, he had to admit, he was in heaven with Jeffy snuggled up against him. He snaked an arm around her waist to hold her and in her unconscious state, she immediately reverted back to what she knew best. She sighed in contentment and wiggled in closer. He breathed deeply, closed his eyes and let the pleasure of holding her once again sink in. Pressing his nose against her hair, he allowed himself to sleep.

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"But how can you be sure?" Shelley cried, sniffling and wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"This is what he was trained for. We have plans in place for almost every scenario."

It was Jason who'd answered her and Shelley's eyes darted to Eric. "Do you know about the plans?"

"Yes, sweetheart. You know that Ricky and I have had years of survival training. We've worked closely with Jason and the scouts and guides in Uganda to make sure Cam will be able to get her out."

Shelley shook her head. "She should have left the moment someone opened fire the night Chris was shot. I want my baby home," she sobbed.

The entire group sitting in the Kinos' living room all shifted uncomfortably. They weren't used to seeing Shelley so distraught. She'd cried so much they didn't know how she had any tears left.

"Mom," Joey said. "I trust Cam. He'll bring her out."

Shelley shook her head. "But Joey, you're not even sure that she's with

him."

"We'll know in about three hours," Joey countered.

"How? How can you know?" she cried.

Eric reached over, took her hand. "Shelley, you have to calm down. You're gonna make yourself sick."

"No! I can't calm down. Tell me how you'll know she's with Cameron."

"Cam is gonna fire flares from a particular location. Our agents are in place to see those flares. He'll hopefully fire two flares. That means he and Jeffy are safe and approximately two hours from our rendezvous point."

"What if they're not safe?"

"Then the flares won't be fired and we'll go in," Jason said.

"Who? Who will go in?" Shelley demanded.

"I have agents there who will immediately go in and find them. And we will also fly in."

"We? We who?"

Joey glanced at Breez and Bella before he answered. "Me, Mark, Ricky, Jeff, Keegan, Brayden, Tristan, Kaleb and about twenty other agents."

"Almost all of Jason's Elite," Eric said with a nod. "But you're focusing on the negative. I feel strongly that she's with Cam and they're safe."

"Shelley, it's not like you to be thinking of the worst case scenario," Ricky pointed out.

"Really, Mom," Bree added. "Remember when Joey was shot? Do you remember that you kept telling everyone to think positive. You were calm and strong."

"Because I knew," she yelled suddenly.

When Bree's mouth opened in surprise, Shelley closed her eyes, sighed heavily, continued in a softer tone. "I'm sorry, Bree. You don't deserve that. It's just that, when that man shot Joey all those years ago and back when you were hit by that stray bullet, I knew you would be okay. I just knew, and I felt calm and reassured, but I don't feel that way right now. I feel like something horrible is gonna happen. Don't you all see?" she said, glancing around the room. "Don't you feel it?"

Mark shook his head. "I feel like she's okay, Mom. I really do. I wouldn't say that if I didn't feel it."

Shelley shook her head to disagree.

"Shell," Angel began. "She's your youngest child, your baby. It's understandable that you can't stop worrying, but just try to envision her with Cam climbing into that helicopter at the rendezvous point."

Eric looked into Shelley's eyes, nodding his agreement with Angel's

statement. It was very unlike his Shelley girl to be so fearful and he realized there may be something else she was picking up on.

Shelley's eyes welled with fresh tears. She blinked and they fell over her cheeks. She nodded, sniffed. "I'm trying," she whispered. "Please, dear Lord, forgive me," she suddenly prayed. "I'm trying to let go, and trust You, I'm trying really hard, God, please protect my girl, in Jesus' name."

"Amen," they all whispered.

"I want her home too," Eric continued, "and I truly believe that Cameron will bring her to us. God is with him, I can feel that."

"But are you sure he has her? What if she's being held hostage by some horrible terrorist group?"

"He has her. They found two dead guys right at the place where Cam would've left the camp," Jason said. "He'll signal us in a few hours. Until then you need to try to relax."

"Why doesn't he just call?"

"Cell phone signals can be picked up. The bad guys will be doing everything they can to find her. We don't want to help them."

Shelley dabbed at her eyes. "Eric, please, let's go to Uganda. Let's get her ourselves."

"If I thought I could succeed I'd do exactly that. But Shelley, they'll be watching everything our family does. We'd only be putting her in more danger."

"What about Agent Akins?" Breez asked.

Joey squeezed her hand. "He's still MIA."

"You see?" Shelley said. "The one person who would've been right next to Jeffy and he's missing. What if they killed him and took her?"

"My agents have scoured the entire camp area. The whole place is being disassembled. They would've found a body. He isn't there."

"Maybe he's with her and Cam," Bella offered.

"Maybe," Jason said. "For now, I have to get back to work. I'll be in touch the moment I hear from Cam. My suggestion is for all of you to get some rest." He glanced at his watch. "It's ten-thirty at night here so it's six-thirty in the morning there. If he has Jeffy with him then he stopped to let her rest at the second rest point. They're probably waking up right about now and getting back on the trail. Cam should be able to shoot the flares by ten o'clock their time."

"So by two in the morning our time we'll know for sure," Ricky said, directing his gaze at Shelley. "And we'll proceed from there. Until then, security for everyone here remains on high." He nodded at his son Eric and his nephews, JoJo and Logan. "You guys are very close to being men.

Make sure you have no lapses in judgement. And there's no reason you can't help with security by keeping your eyes and ears open. For example, one of you sees Taylor outside alone, you find out how and why, and you stay with her until it can be remedied."

"Daddy," Taylor whined. "I wouldn't do that."

"Sorry, baby, just using you as an example. Be alert everyone."

"Maybe it would be better to have everyone stay here," Shelley said. "That way we won't be so spread out."

"I think that's a good idea," Joey said. "Let's make that happen."

Eric and Jason agreed.

The meeting adjourned. Eric and Justin spoke briefly with Jason while Angel said goodbye to Shelley.

Angel hugged Shelley. "It's gonna be okay, girl."

Shelley sighed. "Two a.m. can't come soon enough for me." She forced herself to concentrate on other things. "So, what about Kimmie? Are you sure she's okay?"

"She's with Jensen. Until all this is over, he's been assigned to her. She checks in with me several times a day. I feel pretty good about it."

"Good. At least we can breathe easy about that." Trying to focus on something other than Jeffy, Shelley asked, "How are things coming along with Agent Deal? Do we hear wedding bells?"

"I'm pretty sure that's where this is heading, even though Kimmie doesn't want to do anything without Jeffy."

Shelley's mouth tightened and the tears welled again.

"Oh, Shell, I just meant she wants to wait until Jeffy is home so she can be part of the wedding."

As Angel continued to reassure Shelley, the rest of the family spoke quietly, making arrangements to move into the Kino manse and making claims on bedrooms.

"I'm glad we're all gonna be staying here, aren't you?" Taylor said to Logan as she cornered him alone.

Logan's lips pressed tightly together as he thought hard before he answered to make sure he said the right thing. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, but he didn't want to encourage her either. The girl had a crush on him, that much he knew.

His brother JoJo thought it was funny and cousin Eric had no objections to it even though he'd encouraged his sister to "lay off the poor guy." After all, what could Eric say? His own parents were actually step-siblings who fell in love and got married. Logan was adopted and he and Taylor were not blood related. Still, Logan had a feeling that everyone wouldn't be so easy-

going about the idea if he were to give Taylor her first real kiss, which he had absolutely no intention of doing.

Taylor was three years younger than him which, at sixteen and thirteen, was a huge difference. Besides, he already had a girlfriend and he had no intention of messing that up by flirting with his own cousin. He had to admit though, his cousin, his step-cousin that is, was drop-dead gorgeous. She was a younger version of Jeffy with straighter hair. Her body was perfect, her face pretty darn cute and sometimes when she would stretch out next to him at the pool, or lean close to him, she got his blood racing. He had to remember that she was just a kid. An impressionable kid. So, he smiled at her now and agreed with her. "Yeah, I'm glad we're all gonna be here. I think it will be much safer."

Taylor placed her hand on Logan's arm. "Maybe it will give us a chance to really get to know each other better."

Logan sighed, took her hand and removed it from his arm. "Taylor, I know you like me, but I'm older than you and—"

"Only three years."

"Which right now is a lot. Listen, maybe one day, when you're eighteen, I'll take you out and you can get to know me then, but you know what I think?"

She pouted but looked up in curiosity. "What?"

"I think you're way out of my league. By the time you're eighteen, you'll wonder what you ever saw in me."

She heaved a dramatic sigh, rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I very much doubt that, and I'm holding you to your promise. When I'm eighteen you're gonna take me out."

He smiled. "Deal, but until then, we're just cousins, got it?"

"I got it," she mumbled before she moved away to join her mother.

JoJo and Eric moved up beside him. "Well now, bro, you handled that well," JoJo said.

"Ya think?" He shook his head. "I'm not so sure."

Eric laughed. "I have a feeling my sister will have you compromised by the time she's sixteen."

"You're on," Logan bet. "JoJo?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't take that bet."

"So," young Eric said, changing the subject. "Do we all feel that Aunt Jeffy is okay?"

JoJo and Logan nodded.

"Uncle Joey says Cam is the best and he wouldn't say that about just anyone," JoJo said.

"I agree," Eric said.

"Although, I gotta say, I hate to see Grandma so upset. It's killing me," JoJo added.

"Well, she'll be much better when she hears from Jason tonight."

Logan blew out a breath. "Let's just hope it's good news."

❁

Jeffy awoke to a cacophony of jungle sounds. Some she could identify like the chatter of the blue monkeys. Some she couldn't, like the various birds she'd heard every day but hadn't had time to study. It was just beginning to grow light. Listening to the pleasant sounds, she turned slightly and started to smile—and then everything came back to her. Mirembe was dead. Mirembe's children were dead. She herself had sent two of them to their deaths. Was anyone else injured in the blast? The soldiers that came looking for her, had they hurt or mistreated the other doctors, the nurses and students, or even the villagers in their attempts to find her?

And Cam. Cameron Wallace had walked out of her life five years ago. He'd hurt her terribly. She'd thought she might never see him again, yet now, here he is, working on getting her home. It seems he's become a highly trained agent. Did he work for Jason? It would either be that or the CIA. Ameritech seemed more logical. So, if he trained with Jason, that would mean he's also been in contact with her brother Joey, who was Jason's top man. He said he was here to get her home to her family, which also means he's been in contact with her father.

And all of that meant they had known. They all knew what Cameron had been up to all this time and they knew he was gonna be back in her life and they'd never mentioned it to her. She felt betrayed, utterly betrayed, which made her feel more alone than she'd ever been.

Did her mother and sister know too? Did Kimmie know he'd been training with her father? And what is he doing here? He almost seems like a completely different person. Her Cameron wouldn't know how to kill those two men. Her Cameron didn't speak Russian and climb giant trees in the middle of the jungle. What was going on?

She turned slightly and realized he was no longer lying beside her. Sitting up, she immediately saw an incredible sight. Cameron was doing inverted pushups, on a tree branch fifty feet in the air. Was he crazy? Had he lost his mind? He wobbled slightly and she couldn't help her quickly indrawn breath.

Apparently he heard her, for he slowly lowered his feet, stood and turned to face her. "Good morning."

Her eyes searched his. She didn't want to speak to him. Especially not in so casual a greeting. It was not a good morning and he had no business pretending that all was as it should be.

"Still mad, huh?"

Her eyes narrowed in anger.

He smiled. "Okay. Can't say I blame you."

He moved toward her, picked up the light cloth he'd used to cover her, folded it and placed it in his pack. He motioned for her to stand. When she did, he picked up the miraculously soft little mat, pushed a button, and watched as the mat shrank into a small rectangle. He then placed it inside a plastic sheath and it too went into his pack.

"Time to get a move on," he said. "I'll lower you down first. Once we're down you'll want to relieve yourself and then eat a protein bar and drink some water. You can brush your teeth if you want. There's some environmentally safe toothpaste in your hygiene kit. We'll be arriving at a small watering hole in about an hour and you can bathe there if you like."

"And then what?" she asked.

His eyebrows rose at finally hearing her voice. He smiled. "And then we're about another couple of hours from the point I need to be to signal our ride."

"Our ride?"

"Two more hours from where I signal, there's a small heliport near the village of Bukoshedan. Jason will have a chopper there. He'll want to time it to arrive at the same time we do, so that all the pilot will have to do is swoop in, pick us up, and swoop out."

"Then you *are* working for Jason?"

He at least had the decency to look apologetic, Jeffy thought.

"I do, yes. Look, Jeffy, there's a lot to explain. I realize that. I hope you'll give me that opportunity before you condemn me."

She decided not to give him the satisfaction of an answer. "So, we're about four hours from being on a chopper and headed home?"

He sighed. "Yes. The chopper will take us to an American naval base in Kenya. From there, we'll fly home."

Her heart turned over at the sudden yearning to be standing in the center of a family group hug, loved and protected. Yet, the feeling was immediately overshadowed by the resentment she felt toward her father and brothers for not telling her about Cam. Still, she would give them the benefit of the doubt until she heard their explanation. She looked up at Cam. "Well, what are you waiting for? Let's get going."

"Yes, ma'am," Cam answered, his jaw set. He picked up the rope.

"Over you go."

He lowered her quickly and a few minutes later dropped down beside her and held her backpack out to her. She quickly did as he'd previously instructed and afterward immediately headed out.

Following him gave her ample opportunity to observe him. He seemed taller, but that was probably an optical illusion. His shoulders were broader, his thighs thicker. His waist was trim. He wore a camo green t-shirt and the muscles in his biceps and forearms were ripped. His shoes were the same high-end sport hiking boots that she wore, specially made to be able to run and hike by being both rugged and lightweight. They laced up to cover half the calf for protection. She noticed a small strap just above the edge of his right boot and realized he had a knife hidden there, a smaller one than the one he'd pulled to kill those men.

He'd killed. Her Cam, the one she'd known, would never hurt anyone. And yet, this *was* the same man, though he was no longer hers. She didn't fault him for what he did to those two men. How could she? He'd been protecting her. She understood that. He was now, like her father and brothers, a warrior. Lethal, hardened, dangerous. Yet, her father and brothers were capable of amazing love and gentleness. Was this new Cameron?

Jeffy was so immersed in thought she was surprised when they came upon the small creek-fed pool that he'd mentioned. Glancing at the sun, she realized they had been walking for nearly an hour.

He strode to a large rock, removed his backpack and took some water. "You can bathe if you'd like. Don't swim and don't go out too far. Everything you need is in your pack."

She nodded. He found a large stick and walked along the edge of the water, smacking the surface every foot or so. She supposed he was making sure no crocs or other wildlife were eagerly awaiting their morning meal.

He turned. "I'll be over there on the other side of this rock if you need me."

Again, she nodded her head and waited for him to leave. Swinging her pack down off her back she dumped out its contents. She found clean socks, a clean shirt and lightweight khaki pants all rolled tightly together. Her towel would be the small square microfiber camp towel like the Olympic divers use. She searched for and found the environmentally safe camp soap and immediately began stripping.

First thing she did was wash out her bra and panties and spread them on the rock to dry. Next, she laid out her dirty clothes—pants, tank top, over-shirt and socks—and rolled them up together and put them into her pack.

She went only a few steps out into the cool water and knelt down.

The coolness surprised her, though it was early morning, so she should have realized it would be cool. She washed her hair first, the best she could, then scrubbed her body. She worked fast because, uncharacteristically, she wanted to be dressed before Cam came back. Still, when she finished she couldn't help but allow herself a moment to take in the beauty of the little watering hole. The trees were about thirty yards away and the grass surrounding the area was waist high. She imagined a wild creature could sneak up on her with no trouble but she sensed no present danger. There were wildflowers, yellow and purple. The yellow daisies made her smile.

Sanyu would love this place. She would laugh and splash in the water and pick the flowers and make a crown. Sanyu. Sweet, happy little Sanyu would never laugh and play again. She would never again reach her little arms up around Jeffy's neck and hug her. The grief and despair were overwhelming.

Beautiful Sanyu and brave little Balon. Why? She'd sent them to her tent. She had as good as killed them. Her stomach rolled and the great sobs came up through her chest. Her lungs seemed to collapse and she couldn't breathe.

Cam came around the side of the rock, clean and refreshed. When he first saw Jeffy he thought to tease her about taking so long, but she stood, one hand braced on the rock and one clutching her stomach. She was bent over, her shoulders hunched. He hurried to her side.

"Jeffy. What's wrong? Are you sick?"

She raised her head slowly, her eyes met his. Tears streamed down her face.

"C-Cam, I k-killed them. I killed the children."

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Psalm 51:14

"Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness."

Chapter Six

"I killed them." Still clutching her stomach, she reached out for him with her other hand.

He rushed forward. "Oh, no, Jeffy," he said as he scooped her up into his arms. He took her back to dry ground and sat with her in his lap. "It wasn't your fault, sweetheart."

"I-I sent them to my tent," she cried.

"No, baby, you didn't know. You didn't know. It wasn't your fault. Go ahead and cry, Jeffy. Get it all out."

He stroked her back and held her head against his chest. It was several minutes before her sobs began to quiet. Even when all she had left were soft hiccupping sounds, he remained still.

"I loved them so much," she said quietly.

"I know you did. And they loved you."

She raised her head. "You knew them too?"

"Yes, Jeffy. I've been right there with you the whole time. Well, most of the time."

She sat quietly while she thought about that. "I'm sorry I broke down on you."

"It's okay. You're in mourning. I'm glad you broke down. You needed to get that out."

She sighed heavily. "I want—to go home."

"I intend to get you there."

"Just hours away?"

"Correct."

She shifted slightly, sniffed. Looked down and then back up. "I'm totally naked."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I noticed. It was difficult to ignore."

She glanced up at his face, offered him a timorous smile. "I'd better get dressed."

Cameron pushed her to her feet and watched as she strode to the rock and with her usual efficiency of movement, donned her clothing. She made no effort to hide her body and he made no effort to look away. Her body was strong, lithe, well-muscled. She'd never been modest, he thought, and wondered what that said about her. Complete innocence? Complete confidence? It was as if she had no inkling of what her gorgeous self did to a male.

She reached into the pack, pulled out a comb and quickly rid her freshly washed hair of tangles. It took her only a few seconds to braid it and put everything back in her pack. He rose and moved forward, picked the pack up and held it for her. Turning, she allowed this, which told him the hard shell was softening.

"We've lost a little time so we have to move a little faster for the next two hours."

Jeffy nodded. "You set the pace. I won't slow you down."

He smiled. "I know that."

Jeffy couldn't look away. For just a moment, she saw the old Cameron. The boy she'd fallen in love with. He still had that sweet, goofy kind of smile.

Cam turned and led the way. Grandmaster Kino had been right, he thought. Things between him and Jeffy were different. Put aside the fact that she was confused and mad that he'd left her and hurt her and kept secrets from her. She now saw him in a different light. She now had a growing respect for his physical abilities if nothing else. For now, that would do.

They walked silently for some time before Jeffy finally spoke. "I must be crazy."

Cam glanced over his shoulder. "Why's that?"

"Following you into the jungle."

"Right," Cam said with a self-deprecating smile. The teasing continues, he thought. Though now his lousy sense of direction had been corrected by the intense training he'd been through over the past five years. Cam grinned at Jeffy. "Well, so far, we're headed in the right direction—I think."

"You think?" she said, alarm in her voice.

"Just kidding, Jeffy. Trust me, I know where we're going."

"I don't have any reason to trust you, but I'll try."

He held some thorny vines up and allowed her to walk past him before he took back the lead.

The minutes of silence this time were a little more companionable. Again, it was Jeffy who finally spoke. "Are you the agent Hart spoke

about? One of Jason's Elite who took out the four snipers who attacked us in Kampala?"

"Yes."

"And you've been around the camp the whole time?"

"Most of the time. Sometimes I had to leave to make preparations."

"Preparations like leaving fully loaded packs in the jungle and tying ropes to large trees?"

He smiled. "Yes, like that."

"So are you saying that you knew we would be attacked and I'd have to come with you?"

"No. We were being prepared for any eventuality. Trust me, if I'd foreseen someone planting a bomb in your tent, I would've removed it. It was only by some fortuitous circumstance that you weren't in the tent when it went off."

"Not so fortuitous for the children," she said, her voice somber.

"No, not for them," he agreed. "I can't tell you how bad I felt and how relieved I felt at the same time."

"Then, you knew I wasn't there."

"I knew you were in Mirembe's tent."

Her mind went back to those few moments of terror. "I suppose Hart knows I'm with you?"

"He knows the contingency plans."

"And so does my family?"

"Of course."

"How many of them knew you were with me all this time?"

Cam swallowed. He knew she would be upset that her father and brothers knew what he was up to. They knew she would be angry as well and told him they would handle that problem when the time came. They weren't worried about winning her forgiveness. On the other hand, he'd have a much harder time of it. "Your father and brothers."

"All three brothers?"

"Correct: Ricky, Mark and Joey."

"My mother?"

"No."

"So, none of the women."

"Correct."

"And of course, Uncle Jason."

"Yes. And Jeff, and Keegan."

"And everyone was told to keep this a secret from me."

He sighed. "Yes."

"I'm assuming there is a purpose for that. I'm assuming that somewhere in what you deem as your logical male minds you all thought it necessary that I not know this is what you were up to."

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "In his defense, your father wanted to tell you. He believes that communication is the key to solving any problem."

"I know that. Don't you dare tell me what my father believes."

Cam nodded. "Of course. I didn't mean it like that. I know you know that."

"And knowing that he believes communication is key, can you not see how much more hurtful this is?"

"Yes. I can see it, Jeffy, but he didn't tell you because I asked him to keep my secret, and he gave his word, as did all the others."

"I see. Let me ask you this, Cameron Wallace. Did you decide to play secret agent man after you broke up with me or before? Huh?"

"Jeffy, I didn't really break up with you."

Jeffy stopped in her tracks.

Cam turned to look at her.

"Seriously?" she said incredulously.

He looked down, blew out a breath. "Look, I have an explanation for how things went down, but—"

She threw her hand up. "You know what, Cam? I'm not really in the mood for hearing your ridiculous excuses, so save it." She stormed past him, continuing in the same direction he'd been walking. "Didn't really break up with me," she mumbled. "I have an explanation. I'll tell you what you can do with your explanation," she grumbled.

Cam caught up. "Did you say something?"

She looked back and glared at him. "Nothing you would understand, you Neanderthal."

"Okay," he mumbled, eyebrows raised, as he followed in her wake.

He sighed. He'd come a long way and one of the things he could not do was allow himself to slip into a subservient position like he had been so willing to do in their earlier relationship. Still, he had to be careful in how he showed his strength.

"You know," he finally said, his voice a little louder than he'd meant. "You didn't think I was so Neanderthal a little while ago when you were crying your eyes out against my chest."

She turned, opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. Her eyes met his. She blew out a breath. "Touché." Turning away, she continued down the path.

Two minutes later though, she swung around. "You were at the monastery too, weren't you? You were the guy in the brown robe?"

"Guilty again."

"So where were you when the guy pushed me off the bridge?"

"I was in Turkmenistan, helping with a case. When you went off the bridge I was called home. It was time."

"Time? Time for what?"

"Time to fulfill my mission, which was to be your shadow and keep you safe so that you could complete your life's work." He moved past her, picked up the pace. "We need to keep moving."

"Why couldn't you tell me that it was you shadowing me? Why did you feel it so necessary to keep that a secret?" she asked from behind.

"I was gonna tell you, but at first you were working so hard on meditating and finding your inner peace, I didn't feel it was right to disturb that. Then, your father told me you were really on a roll doing your research and getting your books together. I didn't want to mess that up. I knew that once you knew I was around, you might feel a little angry, or you might remember the hurt you went through, and I knew that would interfere with your work. Before I ever got the chance to tell you, things happened and I had to take you away right then. It couldn't be helped."

She walked quietly for some time before she spoke again and when she did she was much calmer. "There's so much I don't understand. So much I want to ask about."

He stopped. Held his hand up to stop her too. "Shh."

Jeffy came to an abrupt halt. They both listened. They could hear knocking, like someone hammering on a tree. Cam motioned her forward. She moved stealthily to his side. He carefully spread the branches of the low-lying brush. She peered through and a huge smile made its way across her face.

Chimpanzees. It looked like a few dozen of them. They were nesting in the large trees, foraging for fruit and insects. Not at all the noisy, raucous group one thinks of chimps, they were quietly going about their day, playing, eating, interacting with family members. Most chimps in Uganda[1] were in preserves or national parks, so Jeffy was thrilled to find the amazing animals here, wild and free. They were a beautiful sight to behold. They spotted her, but paid her very little mind. She was glad she didn't frighten them.

Cam allowed her to watch for several minutes, enjoying her joy and appreciation for life, but it was time to go. "I hate to ruin your good mood, Jeffy, but we have to keep moving."

Sighing, Jeffy used her mind to bid the chimps farewell. Cam picked up the pace and hurried her toward their destination. The time and the trail passed quickly for Jeffy who was using the quiet to examine her feelings about Cam, her feelings about seeing him again.

So, he was here with her. He'd been training for years to become one of Jason's Elite. His mission was to protect her. Had that been his mission from the beginning? Did he want to come back into her life as more than just a protector? The breakup had hurt her terribly, and no matter what he says, he did break up with her. Oh, they hadn't fought or said ugly things to each other. That wasn't his style, nor hers. Nevertheless, she'd loved him with all her heart and he'd left her. He'd said he couldn't stay with her. He had things he had to do. He had problems he needed to work out.

She'd practically begged him to fill her in, tell her what it was he had to do and she would support him completely, but he hadn't been interested in that. He said he needed to make a clean break. He had to start over. She'd been so confused. She fell into a depression and did things she never thought she would do, things that required repentance. She lost confidence in herself and she handled that by burying herself in two things: her work in medicine and learning more about her psychic abilities. She'd come a long way during those five years.

Getting into the *Association for Psychic Enlightenment Research*, meeting with other psychics and learning what it all meant had been eye-opening. Everyone had the ability to be psychic. It was a matter of clearing one's mind, connecting with God, and letting in the knowledge. She hadn't been trying to be psychic she'd told them. It just happened. She was born that way. They'd explained that the same thing that made her a high genius, the using of more of her brain and the synchronization of the two halves of her brain, played a large part in her psychic abilities. That, along with her constant meditations, had freed her mind in ways most people would never accomplish. However, in all of their instruction, they purposely left out the part about the importance of prayer and talking to God. They didn't want to credit God with Jeffy's gift. But Jeffy knew that her abilities were absolutely because she was so close to God.

They did help her to see that her psychic abilities were not a hindrance, but could be used in her medical practice and medical research to see way outside the box, much like Einstein had done. They'd helped her to understand that the visions didn't come at random with no logic as she assumed. They came when her mind was free to accept the information, times when she wasn't thinking so hard, like when performing ordinary, mundane tasks, or just before waking in the morning and during meditation.

They'd also pointed out that whenever she actually tried to direct and use her gift to read someone's mind or to lift their spirit, she'd been extremely successful.

She'd started in earnest after that to use her psychic awareness in her work and she'd been rewarded by coming a long way fast. At twenty-four years of age, well, twenty-four and three quarters, she'd become the youngest person ever to receive a Nobel Prize. And now people wanted to stop her by taking her life and her old boyfriend wanted to protect her. She was having a difficult time keeping her young woman emotions out of the mix, not to mention the fact that people she loved dearly had died less than twelve hours ago. Less than twelve hours. It hardly seemed possible.

"We're here."

She stopped short at the sound of Cam's voice. His deep timbre seemed to have a calming quality about it and she found herself wishing him to speak again.

"So now we shoot off flares?"

He pulled off his pack, unzipped the top, reached inside and pulled out a gun. She'd thought it would be large and orange-colored, but it was black, and small with a wide barrel. He pulled some small, silver-colored cylinders from an outside pocket of the pack. Quickly, he loaded the gun with one of the flares and grabbed another one. He looked up at her. "Stay here."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to move out past that tree line there to the open field. I'll be right back."

She nodded and watched as he hurried away. A minute later a flare shot high into the air, followed by another. He came back to her at a run, slung on his pack. "Let's go. Try to keep up."

She didn't argue and ran behind him. It occurred to her that shooting the flares notified more than just Jason's people where they were. If the bad guys were looking in the right place, they too would see the flares and know that she was still alive and in what direction they'd been moving. Though, it didn't seem to matter which direction they'd been moving, for Cam changed headings. Instead of moving northwest, like they'd been, he turned northeast. Just two more hours and they would be on a chopper and headed home. It seemed too good to be true.

❁

Eric lay in bed, his eyes on his wife as she stood on the balcony outside their bedroom. At the present moment she was still, merely staring out to sea. For many minutes before though, she'd paced restlessly back and forth.

He wanted to comfort her, but thought she might need this time alone to work things out. If she'd wanted his comfort, he figured, she would've turned to him in the dark. As he watched her now though, she placed the palms of her hands on either side of her head and he knew she wasn't faring well. He rose.

Moving silently up behind her, she only startled briefly when he wrapped his arms around her. "Hello, my love," he whispered, his mouth close to her ear.

She relaxed, leaned her head back against his bare chest. "Eric, you scared me."

"Sorry. As you must know by now, it's my habit to move quietly."

She sighed. "I can't sleep."

"I understand. I wasn't sleeping either, and apparently neither is anyone else in the household."

"Hmm?"

Eric nodded toward his right. She glanced down at the other end of the house. Ricky and Bree stood at the railing of their balcony, staring out toward the ocean.

Turning abruptly in his arms, she looked into his eyes. "It's after two. Why hasn't Jason called? I just know something bad is gonna happen."

"It's only ten minutes after two. Maybe it's taking a little while for the chain of communication to make its way back to Jason."

"With all his high-tech equipment? He should know instantaneously," she cried.

"Okay, you're right. So, they're a little late. It's hard to judge time when you're on foot."

Shelley's eyes welled with tears. "I'm going out of my mind."

"Sweetheart, try to think only positive thoughts. Jeffy is okay. She's with Cam. They'll be home soon."

"But how do you know?" she said, allowing Eric to wipe at her tears with his thumbs.

"It's just solid reasoning. Besides, you even becoming pregnant with Jeffy was a miracle in itself. Then somehow, you lived through that ordeal with James. Another miracle. Then Jeffy came into the world on a dark and stormy night while we were stranded in that ranger's cabin up in the mountains. Then Tommy took her and she survived and we got her back. Then she got mixed up with Senator Daley and he tried to have her killed and miraculously, Cam was there to save her. It was a miracle she and Kimmie weren't hurt when they went over the bridge and it was a miracle she wasn't in her tent when the bomb went off. After so many miracles, I

get the feeling that she has a pretty powerful ally. God is with her, Shelley, He has been from the beginning. He has a plan for her. Jeffy is special and she was born for a reason and I believe that reason is to help heal the world from sickness and disease."

"Well, with that reasoning, we should just not take any steps to protect her and just let God take care of it."

Eric smiled. "You're such a little rebel, Shelley. That's one of the reasons I love you so much. You always seem to see through the BS."

"I don't know about that. All I'm saying is I can't believe you don't want to take some kind of action. It's not like you to leave it up to serendipity."

He smiled. "Absolutely, we have to take action ourselves. God will help those who take what steps they can to help themselves, but we also must trust Him. Trust Him. If we do what we can to the best of our ability, and trust Him, then we can expect miracles. Jeffy was meant to be, but also, we were meant to raise her, love her and protect her. We don't want her to give up, so we can't give up either."

She closed her weary eyes and leaned her head against her wise husband's chest. His arms came around her and offered the warmth and comfort she needed.

"We'll all get through this," he whispered as he bent to kiss the top of her head.

They both raised their heads at the sound of an incoming text. Quickly they moved inside and Eric grabbed up his cell phone, smiled, and read the message aloud to Shelley.

Two flares fired. All is well. Rendezvous with chopper in 2 hrs. Breathe. J

Smiling, Shelley gave a shrill shriek and jumped into Eric's arms. "She's alive. She's okay. Oh, Eric!"

He held her tight.

"I feel sooo much better," she sighed against Eric's neck.

"Good. Now no more negative thoughts, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed, smiling happily.

He moved toward the bed and gently set her down. "Shelley girl, when you get all happy and excited, it's just the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Beautiful? Not this old woman."

"Old? You don't look so old to me. The other day you and Bree were walking down the beach and I honestly couldn't tell who was who. You have the body of a thirty-something year-old woman. Don't you know?

That's why *Fit Women's* magazine put you on their cover."

"It's all your doing," she said. "I haven't gone a week without working out in twenty-six years."

"And it shows. Now shut up and kiss me."

After an hour of running, Cam finally came to a stop. "Drink," he said to Jeffy.

Breathing heavily, she nodded, but was having trouble shedding her pack. Moving forward, he removed the pack from her back and handed her the water. He then dropped his own pack and drank.

"We can walk the rest of the way. Another hour and we'll be in the air," he said.

Jeffy only nodded, mostly because she was having a hard time catching her breath.

Cam looked her over, thinking maybe he'd pushed her too hard. She'd been keeping in shape both at the monastery and at camp. Running sprints. Push-ups. Abs. Still, there wasn't much intensity involved. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Just a little winded. I can handle it."

Cam smiled. *Of course she can. She's a Kino.* Still, he gave her a few minutes to rest before he issued the order to get moving. He had to give it to her, she was holding her own and not arguing with him at every turn. He supposed her father had something to do with that. She seemed to know when it was wise to keep quiet and follow directions.

They walked side-by-side. The weather was clear and sunny, temperature around eighty-five. He was perspiring pretty heavily. He glanced at Jeffy. She too was fairly spent. As a matter of fact, she seemed awfully pale.

"Jeffy, how ya feelin'?"

She bit her lip. "Maybe a little lightheaded. A little nauseated."

"Okay, we're gonna stop and let you—"

"I can make it. Please, Cam, let's keep going. I wanna go home."

"Okay, we'll go a little slower then. Breathe, Jeffy, and sip some of your water."

She agreed, again without an argument which told him she wasn't feeling very well at all.

"What do you think is the first thing you'll do once you get back home?" he asked.

She smiled. His efforts to distract her from her discomfort were blatantly obvious. "After I hug everyone and everything, I'm gonna take a

long, hot, bubble bath, eat a huge bowl of chocolate ice cream and snuggle down into my big soft bed."

"Ah, yes. The purple room with the purple-flowered bedspread. Is it still purple?"

"Actually, it's now more white with only a few splashes of purple as accents."

He realized he'd made a mistake as his mind flashed to the times they'd snuck into her room as teens and had a make-out session. He could clearly see her as she would raise her head for his kiss. She'd had no inhibitions, though they'd never toyed again with the idea of Jeffy losing her virginity. He wondered if that had changed. He wondered if him hurting her had made a difference in how she related to men. And then he found himself wondering if she had given herself to anyone and just how many men there had been since him.

"Cam?"

He shook his head to clear it. "Hmm?"

"I said what will *you* do when we get back?"

"Oh." He blew out a breath and thought hard. "Well—" Cam shook his head. "Well, that's a very good question. I mean, well, I guess first, I'll shake hands with your father and your brothers and everyone else."

"And then?"

"I don't know," he said quietly. "I guess that depends on..." he stopped suddenly.

"On?"

"Man, Jeffy, I don't want to get into this now."

"On me? Is that what you were gonna say? It depends on me?"

"Yes. No. I mean, I've been training for years so that when the time came, I'd be able to protect you. Now that time has come and is almost over. I've been so focused on this mission, I'm not sure what I'm gonna do with the rest of my life. Right now I'd say your father, your brothers and Jason, they're the closest thing to family that I have. And then there's Keegan, and Brayden and Kaleb and Tristan, and of course, Jeff." He glanced over at her. "And then there's you."

"The jilted lover," she said, her brows lifted.

Frowning, he shook his head. "I didn't jilt you."

"Hmm, the definition of jilt, a verb, is to deceive or drop a lover suddenly or callously. I think that word sums it up perfectly."

"Jeffy, I tried to explain to you that I still loved you, but I had things I had to do."

"Things like training with Jason."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you just tell me? If you loved me like you say you did, why didn't you just tell me what you were going off to do?"

He swallowed hard. "I-I had to make a clean break of how things were between us."

"How things were? I thought they were wonderful. Shows what an idiot the silly little genius girl can be," she muttered more to herself than to him.

"Jeffy, please—"

"How can you love someone and hurt them like you did me?" she asked, her voice rising.

"I wasn't trying to hurt you."

"You blindsided me," she said, her words tumbling out quickly now. "Out of the blue, you sit me down one day and tell me you have to leave. You said we can't be together anymore. Yes, you said you still loved me and then, in the same sentence, you said that the love you felt for me wasn't enough."

"You're taking it out of context. I didn't say that I didn't love you enough. I said the fact that we loved each other wasn't enough at that time. That's what I said."

"Whatever, Cam. You didn't call. You didn't write. You cut me completely out of your life. But hey, maybe it was because that's all you know. I mean, I guess that's just the way the Wallaces operate."

He stopped, turned to face her. He had to be sure that the hurtful words actually came from her lips, that she really was referring to his parents and the way they had turned their backs on their own son. His eyes met hers and her defiant stance quickly deteriorated as if she just realized what she'd said.

"Oh, Cam, I'm sorry," she said softly.

He nodded, his lips pressed tightly together. "Apology accepted," he said tersely. "We have to keep moving."

They walked in silence the rest of the way. Jeffy's mind was whirling a mile a minute, all her thoughts and emotions spinning around in an endless vortex of confusion. *He said that what he did when they got home depended on her. Well, he didn't really say that, but he implied it. So what is he really saying? That he still loves her? That he wants her back? That he wants to know if she'll have him back? And if that's what he's asking, then what is her answer? Does she still love him? Does she want him back? She told her mother she'd always love him. Still, he's different now. He's harder, stronger, tougher. He's not the boy she remembered. Yet, that boy was there just a moment ago when she tossed out those hurtful words.*

Geez, she felt really bad about that.

Her mind jumped from her relationship with Cam, to teaching the world how to end disease and the ramifications of that, to being reunited with her family, to seeing her new nieces for the first time, and back as always, to mourning the deaths of Mirembe and her children. She was surprised when Cam held his hand up.

She stopped. "What is it?"

"We're here."

He moved out of the tree line and stood aside. Jeffy wasn't sure what she expected. In front of her was nothing more than a circular open field approximately a hundred yards in diameter, outlined by white stones. Off to the left side stood a small cabin with a large crate and two fifty-five-gallon drums sitting along the outer wall. Directly across from where they stood, on the opposite side of the field was a small dirt path leading into the woods and she supposed toward the nearest village.

Standing next to him, realizing their time together would soon come to an end, she breathed a sigh. "Cam?"

"Yeah."

"I'm really sorry about what I said. It was cruel. I don't know what came over me."

He shrugged. "Look, Jeffy, I get it. Really. I get that I hurt you. And I think I'm beginning to understand that I hurt you more than I realized, and when people get hurt, well, they tend to strike back. They tend to say things or do things they wouldn't ordinarily do. I get that. So, don't think another thing about it."

She looked up at him, and shook her head. "No excuses. I was just plain mean. My mother would be horrified."

"You're human, Jeffy—at least some of the time," he added, trying to lighten her mood. "Well, let's get a move on. Ready?"

She nodded, took one step, put her hand to her head and swayed backward. Cam moved quickly, catching her just before she hit the ground. Laying her down he leaned over her. "Jeffy? Tell me what's happening please."

"Don't go out there," she whispered urgently. "Please. Do not go. There's danger."

Cam knew better than to second-guess her. "So, you're not sick. You saw something? Tell me, Jeffy, what did you see?"

"Nothing. I didn't see anything, but I sense something. Danger. Real danger." She shook her head slowly. "I actually thought maybe I'd lost my gift."

"Lost your gift?" Cam said, peering out at the landing strip as he listened to her with one ear.

"I never sensed Mirembe's death. I slept right through it. Even worse, I didn't even have an inkling about the bomb in my tent, not one single sense that anything was wrong. I sent the children to their deaths." Her eyes filled with tears. "In the back of my head, I've been thinking that somehow, my psychic abilities were gone. What other explanation could there be, ya know? But Cam, I'm sensing something now. There's someone out there. I sense extreme danger."

Sighing, he turned back to her, looked into her eyes, finally nodded his head. "Move back inside the tree line."

He helped her scoot back, then removed his pack. Jeffy watched as he pulled out a weird-looking pair of binoculars.

"What are those?" she asked.

"FDOS². Fine Detail Optical Surveillance," he whispered. "They provide extremely high-resolution 3-D images and make it possible to quickly identify a target." Stealthily he moved away from her. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

"Wait, Cam, please, tell me you won't take any chances."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure I survive so I can get you home."

"That's not what I..." she started, but stopped because he disappeared through some brush. He was angry, or hurt still about what she'd said earlier. She didn't blame him. Hopefully she would have a chance to make it up to him.

Suddenly, she realized she didn't hear anything. It seemed all the wild creatures who normally chatter and sing and call away all the time knew something was about to go down, for the forest had become amazingly, almost deathly quiet. It seemed to take Cam forever before he came back through the trees from the opposite direction from which he'd left.

He sat down immediately, grabbed his pack, pulled a cell phone from a side pocket and began to load the battery.

"I thought you said you didn't have a cell phone," Jeffy whispered.

"No, I didn't. I said we couldn't use one."

"Then why are you using it?"

"Because you're right. We got company. About twenty men, mercenaries, fully armed, waiting for the chopper to appear and see us run out to board. And then they think they will take us all out."

"What are we gonna do?"

"There's too many for me to take on. We go to Plan C. We can't get on that chopper. We gotta disappear, Jeffy."

She nodded, silently accepting that her trip home wouldn't start today. "Who are you gonna call and how can we disappear if you use the phone and they trace us?"

"They're gonna know we're here or nearby as soon as the chopper appears anyway, so I gotta call Jason and try to get him to cry off the chopper. Otherwise, they're gonna kill the pilot."

"Oh," Jeffy said, her face pale. "Oh, no."

"Come on," he said softly, speaking to the phone. "Fire up baby. Give me that signal."

Jeffy knew that like her communication devices, the cell phone wasn't dependent on some cell tower. They were using military satellites for their communications so there should be no problem.

They both heard the distant sound of rotors.

"Damn it," Cam cursed. He tossed the phone at Jeffy. "Take that apart and put it away."

He grabbed his pack, pulled out two sections of a rifle with a scope and began assembling it. Only seconds later he shoved the magazine into place.

"What are you gonna do?" Jeffy cried.

"It's too late to get Jason to call him off," he said as he lay flat on his stomach at the edge of the trees. "I gotta warn the pilot. Get ready to run, Jeffy."

The sound of the chopper rotors grew louder and a few seconds later the chopper appeared over a ridge. Jeffy held her breath, wondering just how Cam was gonna warn the pilot. She knew a moment later when he squeezed off several shots and the drums near the shed exploded into a large fireball.

As she stood dumbfounded, watching the chopper turn sharply and hightail it out, Cam disassembled the rifle, threw his pack over his shoulder and grabbed her hand. "Move it, Jeffy," he barked.

They took off, Cam in front and Jeffy right behind. Bullets sprayed the ground and ricocheted off trees. Jeffy let out a squeal but kept running. The pace was very fast and Jeffy was having difficulty keeping up with Cam's longer strides. When the distance between her and Cam started to open up, he ran back to her, grabbed her hand and forced her to keep up or be dragged.

She ran blindly, doing her best to dig deep inside herself. She pictured her father telling her to do ten more crunches, to jump five more minutes, to kick harder, swing faster, you can do it. She forced herself into a zone, chanting a mantra inside her head, keep going, you can do it, keep going, you can do it. So she had no idea how long or how far they'd run when

Cam pulled her through some thick underbrush and came out at a deep gorge. He let go of her hand and she slipped to the ground.

Kneeling over her, he removed her pack and held a water bottle to her mouth. She sipped and choked and took the bottle from his hand.

He sat beside her and took sips from his own water. "Drink slowly," he ordered.

Jeffy merely lay back, arms out by her sides, sucking air. After several minutes, she forced herself to sit up.

Cameron eyed her. "You okay?"

"Don't feel so good," she moaned. "Uh oh," she said just before she turned on her hands and knees and threw up her guts.

Cam pulled her braid out of the way and laid it gently on her back, then rubbed his hand over her shoulders. When she finished he handed her water. "Here, rinse your mouth."

She did as he said, then eased her back against a tree.

"Better?" he asked.

Her eyes closed, she nodded. "Sorry."

"No reason to be sorry. It's nothing I haven't done during the course of my training."

She opened her eyes. "The training—I've heard Joey say it's about the toughest a human body can take and that not many who've tried to become Jason's Elite actually make it all the way through."

Cam nodded. "There were many times I thought I'd rather die than keep going. But then, something kicks in. I dunno, a sense of duty, a sense of pride, or maybe just survival instinct, something kicked in and somehow I made it through."

Jeffy smiled. "I suppose my father told you he was proud of you."

"He did. I can't tell you how good that made me feel."

"I'm proud of you too, Cameron."

He raised his brows in surprise.

"Really," she added. "What you went through, what you've accomplished, I mean, the transformation is remarkable. I have an inkling of what you've been able to endure, how deep you've had to dig. I'm proud of you and I'm happy for you."

"Thanks," he said softly.

She nodded, looking at his handsome face and hoping the praise undid some of the hurt she'd caused earlier. Not that the praise was empty, indeed, his transformation was remarkable. "So," she said as she drew a deep breath. "You said there is a Plan C. What is it?"

He frowned, shook his head. "You're not gonna like it."

"Try me."

"We have to go to ground, Jeffy. We have to disappear until the coast is clear. If we lay low enough for long enough, the furor over finding you will die down."

"You mean over killing me. The furor over killing me. It seems they want me dead."

"Yes, well, that may be what they want but I am not gonna let that happen, Jeffy."

"So, what? Are you suggesting we camp out here in the Ugandan wilderness for a few days?"

He grimaced. "No."

"No?" she repeated.

"Not for a few days. Possibly a few weeks."

Her mouth dropped open.

"I'm sorry, Jeffy. I know you wanted to go home, but I can't let that be in a body bag. The plan is, we'll be camping out tonight. Then we will spend the next night in a small cabin on the outskirts of a remote village called Little Kapeka."

"Kapeka, I know Kapeka."

"Not Kapeka. Little Kapeka."

"Little Kapeka? I've not heard of little Kapeka. I mean, the regular Kapeka is little."

"Exactly."

She offered a smile.

"Why are you smiling?"

She sighed. "Because saying Kapeka so many times makes it sound funny."

He gave a soft chuckle. "Anyway, so, from Little Kapeka, we'll travel south until Jon comes to pick us up somewhere along our route."

"Jon? I take it this 'Jon' is Ameritech?"

"Yes. You'll like him. All the girls do. He's a good guy. He's an Aussie and he's very friendly with the locals."

"And then what?"

"He'll take us into Kashen Village where we will stay until Jason is able to arrange our transportation out."

She sat silently, digesting what he was saying. She'd thought that by now she'd be on a chopper headed for an airstrip. She'd thought by this time tomorrow she'd be home. She felt so much like crying, but she refused to give in. It felt like a giant weight on her chest. She felt so completely hopeless.

He laid a hand on her thigh and the warmth of his palm seeped into her skin.

"Sweetheart, you're gonna make it home. Things have simply been delayed."

She didn't speak for fear the tears would come, so instead she simply nodded her head.

"We need to cover several miles before it gets dark," he urged as he stood.

"Which way?"

"Down there," he answered, pointing to the bottom of the gorge.

She peered down the steep, rocky slope to the trickle of the river far below where they stood.

"During the rainy season we wouldn't even be able to walk down there, but for now, it's perfect cover. About four miles and around a few bends we'll come to a cave where we can spend the night. Hopefully it will be unoccupied."

"Unoccupied?"

"Like, no bats or rock pythons or other lovely creatures."

She was too tired to even react. "How are we gonna get down there?" she asked wearily.

He smiled. "We climb."

She watched as he rummaged through his pack, extracted two pairs of rawhide gloves with open fingers. He pulled on one pair and handed the other to Jeffy. He loaded his pack on his back, walked to the edge of the cliff and kicked some vines. Finally, he bent over and grabbed a thick rope ladder, held it up with a smile. "You ready?"

Shakily, Jeffy stood, put away her water bottle, put on her pack and worked the gloves over her hands. At the edge of the gorge, she looked down and shook her head. "Seriously?"

"You afraid of climbing down?" Cam asked.

"I'm afraid of falling down," she said, half in jest.

"Jeffy, I won't let you fall. Besides, that doesn't sound like the Jeffy Kino that I know."

"Well, Cam, sorry if that disappoints you, but my body is pretty worn out. Very little sleep. Very little food. Emotional trauma. As I stood up I realized my legs are actually shaking."

"Again, I won't let you fall. I'm gonna spoon you the whole way. We'll climb in tandem. You can do it."

Blowing out a doubtful breath, she nodded. "Okay. Lead the way."

Cam eased his body over the side and took a strap with a metal hook

that was attached to his pack and locked onto the ladder a rung below himself. He nodded at Jeffy. "Let's get going."

She backed her way into position just above Cam. He moved down a rung. And then she moved down.

"Okay, so, when your face is level with the hook, unhook it and hand it to me," Cam ordered.

"Gotcha," she grunted.

They made their way down slowly but surely, and by the time they reached the bottom, both Jeffy's and Cam's arms were shaking.

The moment she touched down she turned to him with a huge smile. "We did it," she exclaimed, jumping into his arms.

He spun her around, hugging her hard against his body. "We did it alright," he said softly. He set her down and gazed at her upturned face. Man, how he wanted to kiss her, though he didn't dare. Not yet. He was too afraid of messing up their already shaky reunion. Still, he wasn't gonna be able to last too much longer before he showed her just how much he cared for her.

He rubbed the backs of his fingers over her cheek. "Good job, Jeffy. Come on now, we gotta keep moving."

❁

"How's she doing?" Ricky asked as Eric came into the kitchen.

Eric shook his head. "She's not handling it very well. She thought she'd wake up this morning and hear that Jeffy was on her way home. She'd planned to get her on the phone."

"Yeah, Bree too. She's pretty upset. I'm making her some chamomile tea. Shall I make some for Shelley as well?"

Eric nodded. "Thanks. That's what I came down for." He turned at the sound of muffled voices. Mark and Joey stood on the deck outside the dining room staring at the ocean and discussing the situation. Eric moved to the door.

"Guys," he said softly.

"Eric," they answered in unison.

"How's Mom?" Mark asked.

"She's not well. Haven't seen her this bad since, well, since Jeffy was seven and Tommy Crane had invaded our lives."

Mark nodded. "Did you remind her Jeffy is with Cam. That she's safe, at least for now."

"I did," Eric answered, "but it didn't seem to make much difference. She won't feel good until Jeffy is home."

"Yeah, I'm inclined to feel the same way," Joey mumbled.

"I haven't spoken to Jason yet today," Eric said. "So, we're on to the next phase?"

Joey nodded. "Yes. They'll go to ground for a while and then Keegan and his mates will be flying in."

"Which means we're expecting to have to make a show of force?"

"Just being prepared. If we have to move, we wanna do it quickly and we want our top men on it."

Eric nodded. Jeffy was alive and well. He knew it. He felt it deep within, but he agreed with Shelley. He too felt some inkling of impending doom. So, if it's not Jeffy's doom—whose is it?

✞✞✞

Proverbs 21:23
"Those who guard their mouths and their tongues
keep themselves from calamity."

Chapter Seven

Thankfully, the cave was unoccupied. It had a large opening, about fifteen feet across and it went at least twenty feet deep into the rock. The floor was dry and hard.

Cam watched Jeffy as she nibbled slowly on her food. They dined on raspberry protein bars and water. Her face appeared thinner and pale. Her eyes blinked slowly as she seemed to concentrate on chewing. They'd bathed in the river, washing the perspiration from their bodies and Jeffy had left her hair down to dry. It hung down now nearly blocking her face from his view, yet her eyes seemed luminous in the gray light of dusk.

"How are you feeling?" Cam asked her.

"A little better," she conceded. "It's good to be clean and dry. My feet hurt though, not used to running so much. I had to doctor a few blisters."

He glanced at her sock-covered feet that were tucked up closely to her body. "Do you need me to take a look at them?"

She smiled. "I think I have it taken care of."

He nodded. "Of course."

She frowned. "But, uh, thanks for the offer."

"Yep," he said as he rose and dug the sleeping mat out of his pack.

She watched as he prepared their bed. Both her body and mind were so tired. She'd slept only a few hours when Balon and Sanyu had come to her tent to wake her. Then all hell had broken loose and she'd run for hours that night before she and Cam had climbed into a tree and slept. They'd traveled for hours again today including a high-speed sprint. It all had taken a toll on her body and possibly even more on her spirit. She wanted her mother, her family, so badly. She needed their comfort, but she couldn't have them. All she had was this hardened man who'd sworn to protect her. This hardened man who used to be a kind, sweet boy whom she trusted. Now he was a rough and tough man whom she wasn't sure at all about trusting. Oh, she could probably trust him physically, with her life, but not with her

feelings.

Glancing at him, she watched him settle himself on the edge of the mat. He spread a light cloth, the same one he'd covered her with last night, she supposed. Then he pulled a pistol, looked inside the chamber, checked the ammo and laid it near the mat close to where his head would be. Finally, his eyes met hers.

"You need to rest," he said softly.

She blinked and was surprised to feel tears fall over her cheeks. Quickly, she wiped them away.

"Hey," he said, rising and coming to stand before her. Reaching down, he grabbed her by her upper arms and pulled her up to stand. "Oh, sweetheart, don't cry now. It's gonna be okay. We're gonna get you home, I promise you, Jeffy."

She nodded her head furiously, trying to make the tears stop. "I, I don't know why I'm crying. I'm just so tired, I guess. And..." She stopped as she concentrated on wiping her eyes.

"And what?"

She shrugged. "I guess I was looking so forward to seeing my mom and dad and Bree and my brothers." She sniffed loudly. "And my sisters-in-law and my nephews and nieces," she chuckled almost hysterically. "Everyone. Kimmie and Marissa and Jeff and Mickey and..." The tears started anew.

"Okay, now, Jeffy, I get what you're saying. You've been through a lot over the past year and a half. You've been strong and stoic and now, you're done. You want to go home and let the love of your family heal your wounded soul."

She nodded, looked up at his face. "Th-that's exactly it. I feel so lost. I need them."

He brushed the back of his knuckles over her cheek. "I understand."

She hiccupped. "But I can't have them, can I? I know logically, I need to reconcile myself to that and just get over it. But," she blinked, "it's, well, it's hard. It's been a long, hard year and the past thirty-six hours have been absolute hell and dear Lord that sounds so freakin' pitiful. Where is my strength?" She shook her head, gave a small smile. "I seem to have misplaced it along with everything my father has ever taught me."

"Jeffy, do you think you should be a statue with no feelings at all? You're human, or possibly superhuman," he joked in an effort to lighten her spirit.

"I don't feel so super. I feel like a lost little girl."

"You are. Well, at least a lost young woman. You have the right to stop being the caretaker of the world for a little bit and just be you. You have the

right to your emotions. I mean, Jeffy, you just lost three people that you loved dearly—five including the babies. You have to allow yourself time to grieve and time to get over the shock of what's occurring."

She nodded, wiping the last of her tears. "I loved them so much," she said softly. "Not just Balon and Sanyu, but Mirembe too. We were all so excited about getting to see the babies and holding them and naming them. We were excited about them coming to the states and introducing them to the family. It's so hard to think that they're actually gone. Just gone," she mumbled.

"It's a great loss," Cam agreed. "And you haven't really had proper time to grieve, to mourn their loss. So, yeah, babe, a few tears are okay, ya know?"

"You're right, of course." Wearily, she leaned her head against his chest and let him hold her. Without thinking, her hands spread over him, feeling the hard muscle and ridges of his chest before they made their way around to his back. Sighing, she hugged him tight.

Being with him, being close to him was so natural, it was as if they'd never been apart. They fit. They always had. She admitted to herself, it felt good to be snuggled up against him again. It felt more than good. The hunger was still there as it had been since the first day she'd met him, only now it wasn't the curiosity of a young girl. It was the need of a woman. She sighed, rubbed her cheek against him and pressed her ear to his heart, listening for the strong, steady beat. "I can't have my family right now, but at least I have you."

He smiled. "Yes, you do." He cupped her face in his strong hands, leaned down. "Listen to me, Jeffy. I'm here for you now. I'll always be here for you."

She bit her lower lip and sniffed.

He watched her teeth make indentations in her lip. Oh, how he wanted her, yearned for her.

As if she knew what he was thinking, she gave a slight nod and he wondered if he'd let his guard slip and she was reading his mind.

"I need you, Cam," she said again, her voice soft and pleading.

It took a second, and then he realized she was not talking about emotional support. She was talking about a physical need, a need for physical closeness, for release. The touch of her soft lips to his sent a jolt right through his heart. The night at her home, before her press conference, he'd watched her and wanted her and it had been miserable. He remembered thinking, just one kiss. If only he could have just one kiss he'd be okay.

And now it was happening. She pressed her lips to his. He could feel her need, her urgency. She was allowing her tumultuous emotions to vent through the kiss. Her arms lifted and wrapped around his neck.

Slanting his head, he deepened the kiss, both of them making small grunting sounds until he felt her body go limp against him. She sighed in the back of her throat and her arms fell away to hang by her side.

He broke the kiss, stepped back to make sure she was okay. Her eyes were closed, she swayed on her feet as if she were in a deep trance. And then her eyes blinked open and she moved forward and kissed him again.

Finally though, his brain kicked in. He wanted her, wanted her badly, but not like this. She'd said it herself, she needs him. She needs him because at present she's in turmoil and she's unable to have the comfort of her family, and so she's turned to him. He understood it. He understood her need. Yet, if he were to take advantage of the situation, he just might ruin the chance of ever having her come to him willingly out of love. He'd fought and trained and lived without her for five years banking on his ability to win back her love, not his ability to seduce her.

Taking her face in his hands, he broke the kiss and pulled away slightly, looking into her eyes.

She whined in protest and turned her face up, offering her mouth again. He smiled at her.

"Why are you stopping?" she demanded. "I need you, Cam. Please," she whined.

"I know," he said softly. "I understand." And I need you, he thought. Cam scooped her up in his arms, carried her to the mat and laid her down, then eased down beside her. He closed his eyes a moment, pushing away his own feelings.

She turned toward him immediately, but he pushed her onto her back and covered her mouth with his, kissing her gently, deeply, slowly, fighting and controlling her efforts to have the wild, frenzied coupling that she craved.

He lifted his head. "Jeffy. I want you to get some rest."

Her eyes flew open. "What?"

"I don't think it's a good idea to do what you have in mind."

She didn't protest or argue like he expected, which told him she knew instinctively that he was right.

"It's been a difficult few days to say the least and I haven't seen you do what I know you usually do often."

"And just what is that?"

"Pray. Have you forgotten to pray? I'm positive the fam back home is on their knees."

She sighed, knowing he was right on. "I guess it feels like there's been no time."

"No time like the present," he said.

She smiled. "You sound so much like my dad."

"Sorry."

"No, don't apologize. I like it. It's comforting. I mean, it's kind of like he's here with me."

"I wish that he was, but you're stuck with me."

"I guess that's not so bad."

"Back to the original subject, Jeffy. Would you like to pray together? Or if you'd rather, I can make myself scarce and give you some privacy."

She looked at him curiously. "The Cam I remember wasn't so sure about the existence of God."

Cam smiled at her. "He has made himself known to me."

"Is this again the influence of my father?"

He shrugged. "He's a pretty influential guy, don't ya think?"

"Yes, he is."

"He didn't push anything on me."

"No, he wouldn't do that."

"I just watched him. He has a kind of power that emanates from him. I wanted to have that. Feel that for myself. So, I began to search. I asked him about it. He directed me to its source. Once I began to earnestly reach out to God, He began to touch my heart. I started reading the Bible, and praying about it, and slowly, I began to have a knowing, that this God thing, it's real, He is real. Jesus is real. He is the Son of the living God. The difference this has made in my life is incredible. From knowing nothing, having no guidance in my life, no morals, not even knowledge of right and wrong other than my own instincts, going from all of that to having the love of God, and actually feeling that love, I mean, deep in my heart. The difference is amazing, like night and day."

Jeffy blinked back the tears. "Cam, that is a beautiful testimony. It helps me so much. I've always known God, and wouldn't know what it's like to be without Him. You are so much stronger than me. You had to go through so much to find Him and to bring yourself into the light. I'm so proud of you."

Cam breathed deeply. She had no idea how much her words meant to him. "I had your father's help. And a certain scripture that really got me through the past years."

"What scripture is that?"

"Philippians 4:13."

She nodded with a smile. "One of my favorites."

He took her hands. "So, Jeffy, will you pray with me?"

She nodded and closed her eyes, listened as Cameron's masculine voice appealed to their Father in Heaven, gave thanks they were still alive, asked for protection and guidance, pleaded for peace of mind for Jeffy, acknowledged that they wanted only God's will to be done and offered themselves as His servants, all in Jesus' name.

Jeffy whispered her "amen," because that's all she could do.

Cam smiled at her. "You're as beautiful as ever," he said softly.

Eyes closed, tears streaming, she made no sound.

Gathering her close, he pressed her head against his chest and stroked his hand over her silky curls. A few minutes later she was sound asleep.



"Cam."

He came awake and aware immediately, his training kicking in. A quick scan told him all was well for now. Jeffy still lay on his chest, her hand resting over his heart, moved back and forth slightly. "Yeah?" he answered her.

"Why didn't you just ask me?"

"Ask you what?"

"Why didn't you ask me to wait for you? I mean, when you made the decision to train with Jason, why didn't you tell me what you wanted to do and just ask me to wait for you? I would've waited. You had to know that."

He brought his hand up to cover hers. "I couldn't ask that of you, Jeffy. Yes, I knew you'd wait, but I was unsure of myself. Untested so to speak. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to complete the training. What if you waited for me and I failed? What would I have done then, huh? Come crawling back with my tail between my legs and settle down at my master's feet?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. The point is, it was something I had to do on my own, without the pressure of your eyes on me. I didn't tell you simply because I was afraid of failing."

She snorted softly. "That would not have happened."

"You don't know that. Joey said it was gonna be the hardest thing I'd ever done. Back then Jason's Elite was just getting started. At that time no one had made it through the training. Not one person. I wanted to try. I wanted to prove myself. And besides all that, things had to change between us."

"Change? Why?"

"The way you thought of me had to change. Our interactions had to change and the only way to completely do that was to go away and reintroduce myself to you at a later date as a different person."

"So, even though you still loved me, and you knew I loved you, you had to leave to become a different person? I just don't get it."

Drawing a breath, he sighed deeply. "I know you don't."

"What I do get is that you left me. You hurt me more than I ever knew I could be hurt. I simply could not understand why you didn't love me anymore."

"I told you, I did love you. Remember?"

"Yeah, but to me those were just empty words. I felt like if you really loved me, you wouldn't leave me with no clue as to where you were. You would've at least written or even called to find out how I was doing."

"I didn't have to."

She thought that over. "Because you knew how I was doing, because my father and brothers were in constant touch with you."

"Right."

"Okay, but did you think that maybe I might want to know how you were? What you were doing?"

"Like I said, Jeffy, I needed to make a clean break. You had to forget who I was and when the time came, you would get to know the new and improved me."

"And just who is this new you?"

"You tell me."

She thought quietly. "I don't know. You're like, some superhuman being. Invincible. Strong. I guess, more confident. Definitely a little cocky, a lot like my brother, Joey, but you're still Cameron. I mean, you seem really different and yet I still see glimpses of the Cameron I knew, so I guess you're still my Cam."

"Yes, I am, because every experience I've ever had, every person I've ever known has helped make me the person I am today, including you, Jeffy. The love I felt for you had everything to do with who I am today." He stopped, squeezed her hand. "The love I have for you now is a hundred times greater."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're saying you still love me, even now?"

"I never stopped loving you, Jeffy. I never will."

"I'm so confused by all this."

"Eventually I'll be able to tell you the whole story, but I want to tell you in small bits so you have time to digest what I've said before I tell you any

more."

"Again, you sound like my father."

"Your father had a great deal to do with me leaving you. He was the catalyst."

"I don't think I want to know anymore."

"Don't be angry with your father."

"Well, I *am* angry with him. It feels as if he's betrayed me. You don't understand what a rock he's been to me my whole life, and now it makes me feel so alone to think he betrayed me."

"He didn't betray you, Jeffy. I know of a surety that he only had your well-being in mind and that is not a betrayal."

Giving in, she sighed. She snuggled her head up under his chin. "Fine. I will try not to be angry with my father and one of the reasons I will try is because it hurts too much to think anything else. For now though, I just want to forget everything."

"That's fine with me. The present moment is really the only one that counts."

She pouted. "You've become wise like my father too."

He smiled. "I've definitely been through an awakening of sorts."

Her hand moved slowly over his chest and he knew immediately where her mind was going. "No," he said simply, placing his hand over hers to still it, knowing she would understand the complete message.

"You want me, I know, I can feel it."

"Not now. Not like this. Besides, you know it's not right." He took a moment to breathe deeply and raise his mental defenses against her probing mind. "And it's rude to read someone's mind without their permission."

She blew out a breath. "Sorry, it was loud. And yes, I know it's not right and it wouldn't be the first time I've chosen the wrong path. I don't seem to be myself. I keep going back and forth. Should I be mad at you? Should I even speak to you? I need you right now because we're in the middle of Uganda, so I'm dependent on you no matter how much I don't want to be. If you don't want me to give myself to you, well then, what do you want from me?" she asked, exasperation evident in her voice.

"When you come to me, I want it to be out of love. Not because you need to release some pent-up emotions and certainly not because you're dependent on me."

"You want me to come to you out of love?"

"Yes, Jeffy. Because I love you. When we kissed last night, it involved every bit of my heart. It had everything to do with the love I feel for you."

"Stop saying that. You don't love me. You left me. You hurt me."

"I've always loved you. I do love you. And I want you back."

She sat up, her eyes wide at his admission. "Well, you can't have me back. So there. I won't let you just waltz back into my life. Maybe you don't understand how much pain you caused me. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stop thinking of you. I cried for days. I tried to have other relationships but they didn't work out. I even went to some bars, got drunk. Me! *I* got drunk! And what's worse is..."

"What? Don't stop now. What else?"

"I got stinking drunk and had a few one-night stands. THAT is how I lost my virginity. I took one of the most important steps of my life with a stranger who didn't give two figs about me. I willfully committed sins from which it was a long road back. I was so ashamed. But I did it because I was so depressed I simply didn't care anymore. Do you know how bad I had to feel to get myself into a situation of waking up alone in some strange man's bed and not even remember what we'd done together? To read a note that said, 'thanks babe, let's do it again sometime'? Then I felt so ashamed that I thought I didn't want to live anymore. And I kept all this a secret from my family."

His heart dropped. "Jeffy," he said softly. "I'm sor—"

"Oh, now you're sorry. But back then, did you think about what I would be going through?"

"Yes, I thought about it. That's why I asked about you so often."

She shook her head. "You asked my father and brothers. Well, they didn't know the half of it, and you know what? I feel betrayed by all of them. And I feel they betrayed me because of you. And that really pisses me off. And that anger is directed at *you.* And I can't talk about this anymore. Every time I start a conversation with you I just end up mad, so I guess I just won't talk to you anymore."

"Jeffy..."

She started dressing. "Just get me home, Cameron Wallace. That's what Uncle Jason is paying you to do, so just do it."

He nodded. He'd really blown this conversation. He began breaking camp without another word.



They'd walked the entire day in silence, arriving at the small cabin in Little Kapeka around dusk. It was nothing more than a room with a cook stove and a pallet on the floor; however, there was a small bathtub with a hand pump for water and Jeffy took advantage of that by bathing and washing her underwear.

Cam cooked a meal of canned stew meat and veggies and Jeffy gobbled

it down as if it were a gourmet meal. Because she was still, not speaking to her assigned rescuer, the night was quiet. The pallet turned out to be clean and soft and Jeffy fell immediately to sleep.

Cam thought Jon would pick them up along the trail sometime the next day, but that didn't happen. Not that day and not the next. They'd ended up camping out again. It'd now been over three days since Jeffy's vow of silence. Of course, they'd been walking at a fast pace and there wasn't much energy for conversation. Still, Jeffy had to admit she was feeling a little silly about it. So, they'd once been a couple. And so, he wanted her back. And so he went away for five years and made something of himself. Why was she so angry? It wasn't like her at all. She needed time to figure everything out. Maybe when she had a moment or two of peace she'd be able to put everything in perspective. Until then, she'd do well to get all the information from him that she could, so not speaking to him was indeed, silly.

The past two nights since leaving the little cabin in Little Kapeka, Cameron had produced a tent from what she'd come to think of as his magic backpack that he must have borrowed from *Dora the Explorer*.

She missed the stove in the cabin that had provided cooked food and warmth. They'd not made a fire for obvious reasons. Fire can be seen and smelled for miles and miles.

So, they'd sat together without speaking and eaten their protein bars under the stars. Then they'd climbed inside the tent and slept side by side.

They'd already been walking several hours since they'd broken camp this morning. Jeffy judged it to be close to noon. She'd been thinking about her family and how worried they probably were. She glanced at Cameron. She realized that his parents probably had no idea where he was or what he was doing. They had no idea he was in any kind of danger and worse still, they probably didn't care. She softened toward him. He was alone in the world except for her and her family.

He said he still loved her, but he'd had to leave and do this hard thing. She understood being driven to accomplish something. If only he'd told her. Yet, he didn't tell her because he thought she had to see him as a different person. Why?

Walking quietly beside him for days, she'd tried to reach out to him with her mind, see if she could sense anything. But there was nothing. She wasn't getting a thing.

"How much longer, do you think?" she finally asked, her voice gravelly from disuse.

His head jerked around at hearing her speak. He smiled at her, cleared

his throat. "Well, since Jon didn't make it to us yesterday, the next rendezvous point is not far at all. Just through these trees and across the field is a small road. We'll follow it until..."

She'd been watching his backside, marveling at the muscle there when he came to a halt and she practically ran into him.

"What is it?" she asked.

He put a finger to his lips and parted some branches. Jeffy's mouth fell open. She was looking at a large green field that seemed to be completely covered with flowers—and butterflies. The flowers were yellow and white. Most of the butterflies were white with black details. Some were the orange and black of the Monarch. They rose and settled individually, fluttering high, then swooping low. It was one of the most beautiful sights Jeffy had ever seen and she couldn't help the tears from coming to her eyes.

She turned to Cam, her eyes blinking wide. "It's so beautiful," she whispered, unable to control the emotion.

He smiled at her, and she was surprised to see that he too had tears in his eyes.

"There are indeed beautiful things to behold in this world. Gifts," he added as his eyes moved from Jeffy back to the field of butterflies.

"I wonder why they're all here. What phenomenon has caused so many to be here in this one place at one time?" she asked as she moved past him to get a better view.

"Maybe it's a sign," he offered.

She smiled, glanced back over her shoulder at him. "Maybe."

"Maybe they were sent here to cheer you up, to lift your spirit and heal your heart. You know, the world can only take so much downtime from June Flower Kino."

She gave a soft laugh. "I definitely haven't been myself, have I?"

Suddenly she dropped her pack off her shoulders. "Well, it's time to be me once again." She took off running out toward the middle of the green lake of fantasy.

"Dammit, Jeffy, wait!" Cam yelled.

He dropped his own pack, pulled out his FDOS and took off after her, drawing his pistol from its holster as he ran. He caught up to her in the center of the field. Eyes closed, arms thrown out wide, face turned up toward the sun, she spun in a circle.

His field glasses on, he moved around her, looking out in all directions, gun raised. He realized that from a distance it would look like some odd choreographed dance.

"Jeffy, I appreciate your impulsiveness," he said slowly, "but you could

have at least let me scan the area first before you ran out to be a sitting target."

She opened her eyes, smiled. "I'm *standing*."

"Very funny."

She laughed. "I'm sorry I worried you. Would it make you feel any better to know that I scanned the area and felt no danger?"

He blew out a breath. "Maybe a little, but still, you are my responsibility."

"Yeah, you've made that clear," she quipped.

"And besides evil men, there are wild animals to think of."

"Oh, and snakes too," she said as she ran in a large circle around Cameron, reaching to cup the butterflies in her open palms.

He shook his head as if she were an errant child. "Yeah, Jeffy, snakes too."

She leapt in the air. "Thank goodness you have your fancy glasses and trusty gun. Do you see anything dangerous?"

"No, but I have to ask you to not take chances with your life."

She stopped dancing, moved close to him, and lifted her arms around his neck. "Oh, poor Cameron. I'm making things very difficult for you, aren't I? Well, you did say it was time for me to be myself. And this is definitely me."

He couldn't help but smile. "Yes it is."

"We live in the now," she said. "In the moment—isn't that what you said the other day? It's what my father says all the time. And at this moment, the heat from the sun is warming my cheeks and it feels so good. The breeze is blowing ever so slightly making the grass and flowers sway gently and it is so beautiful. The butterflies are fluttering their wings, causing who knows what changes on the other side of the world, and we are both a part of this moment. Isn't it wonderful?"

Chuckling, he nodded his head. "Yeah, it's wonderful. And you have your arms around me and I can only be grateful for that since a few minutes ago you wouldn't even speak to me."

"My heart has melted," she whispered. "Some," she added with a smile. "I don't quite understand everything yet, but I trust that I will, eventually. So, until then, there is no reason to let darkness and anger fill my heart."

"I think that's very level-headed of you."

She grinned. "Thank you, Cameron Wallace."

"You're welcome, and now, since we're living in the moment..." He bent his head and gave in to the overwhelming urge to kiss her.

She didn't resist. She tilted her face up and offered her mouth to him.

Gently, he touched his lips to hers, brushed back and forth across them, taking in her scent before he settled his mouth over hers.

There was something so alive in her kiss. Soft, sensual, making him want with a fierceness he'd never known. Pulling away, he looked into her eyes and realized she was feeling the same. "Oh, Jeffy," he whispered. "Everything you do, everything you say, pierces my heart."

She leaned close, nibbled on his ear. "Kiss me again. In this moment in time, I am yours."

He closed his eyes, thinking about her words.

"You hesitate?" she asked.

"I'm trying to figure out if taking this moment with you will destroy my future with you."

"Ahh, I understand, but you can't worry about the future. Whatever will be will be. You can't live in fear of what may or may not be."

"Good grief, it's amazing how much *you* sound like your father."

She smiled sweetly. "Here's something to think about—what if not taking this moment is what destroys our future together? Have you thought of that? I am offering myself to you. Kiss me now, in this moment. Do you want to?"

"With every fiber of my being."

"Then kiss me, Cameron Wallace. Come on, show me how much you love me."

He sighed. Those words were the same ones that guys use all the time to get the girl to give in. "Jeffy, there is this part of me that insists you only allow me to kiss you because you love me," he argued. "Not some impulsive sport."

"Do you think I make this offer in anger? In sympathy? In charity? I want you to kiss me, Cam, so it isn't charity. And I assure you I feel no sympathy for you. And there is no anger left. So, I am offering you all the love I'm capable of at this time. Take it, now, or let's continue on our journey."

He pulled her to him roughly and gave her a bruising kiss.

She squealed in delight, then pushed him away.

She unbuttoned her shirt and let it fall, then swiftly pulled her tank top and bra over her head.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"I have an urgent need to run naked through this field."

Cam shook his head. "No way, Jeffy."

"Yes way," she laughed. "I want to run naked in the sunlight and among the flowers and butterflies."

He stood there a moment looking at her.

"What?" she laughed.

"I'm picturing you naked in the sunlight and flowers with the butterflies floating all around you and it's intoxicating, but—"

"No buts."

"Yes, 'buts.' We're standing in the middle of an open field with a road running along beside it. There are enemies somewhere out there trying to kill you. I left my pack over there in the cover of the woods."

She unbuttoned her pants and stripped them off.

"Jeffy, did you hear anything I just said?"

She laughed. "I guess I'd better hurry."

"No, Jeffy."

She ran around him, in a huge circle, jumping over flowers, reaching for butterflies that seemed to be dancing with her.

For a few moments he could only stare. The scene he watched was mesmerizing. But he quickly cleared his head, raised his gun and turned in a slow circle.

She leapt at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling his head down for a kiss. Cam didn't fight her mostly because he had both hands on the gun. He kept his eyes open while she kissed him, searching for danger.

She moved back across the field. He did his best to not look at her, but couldn't help but notice she had a bikini tan line. His eyes moved up to her face. Her eyes were closed, her head turned up to the sun. With the flowers and butterflies outlining the picture he beheld, it was like being lifted into a fantasy world.

She ran toward him, not slowing, and finally tackled him. He landed on his back and she leaned down, kissed his mouth.

"Oh my goodness, that was so much fun," she murmured, shifting over him slightly.

He grunted with her movement, then, smiling, reached up and cupped her face. "You are perfection," he said softly.

"If that's so then why are you frowning?" she asked.

"Jeffy—"

He stopped, flipped her off him and held her down against the ground. He reached for the gun and lay flat on his stomach. "Grab your clothes," he ordered. "But stay down while you do it."

"What is it?"

"I heard something."

Cam maneuvered around, scanning the area. A tan minivan bearing a

Wilderness Safaris sign was now parked at the edge of the field. Cam couldn't see the driver. He moved a few feet to his right to grab up his field glasses and put them on. Still no driver.

"Can you see who it is?" Jeffy asked.

"Shh," was his only response.

After a minute of silence, Cam turned to her. "We're gonna edge our way back to where we dropped our packs. We need to get out of the open. I want you to stay right b—" He swung around on his back, his pistol aimed straight at the heart of the man who stood about twenty feet behind them.

"G'day, mate."

Cameron blew out a breath, rolled his eyes. "Dammit, Sweet, I could have killed you."

"I coulda killed you first," Agent Jon Sweet drawled.

There was nothing Cam could say to that because it was true. What in the heck had he been thinking?

Jeffy, having succeeded in getting her pants up, sat up, smiling, as she reached for the rest of her clothing.

"Do you mind?" Cam asked Jon.

Jon's eyes moved over Jeffy. "Not a bit." But as Cam's eyes narrowed, Jon tipped his finger to his hat. "Pardon me, ma'am," he said as he turned his back.

Jeffy giggled and dressed quickly.

"The ma'am you've been eyeballin' is Doctor June Flower Kino. Have a little respect."

"Oh, I got respect for the good doctor there," Jon quipped with a smile. "It's you I've lost respect for."

"Yeah, well, you can't say anything to me that I'm not already saying to myself," Cam muttered as he stood and holstered his pistol.

Cam waited until Jeffy had her bra and tank top on before he made the introductions. "Jeffy, meet Jon Sweet. Jon, Dr. Kino."

Jon turned. "A pleasure," he said.

"Likewise," Jeffy answered casually, offering her hand. "Listen, don't be too hard on Cameron. He's been really stalwart about taking care of me."

"I don't need you to defend me, Jeffy," Cam growled.

Jon looked from Jeffy to Cam and back to Jeffy.

"The, uh, circumstances you find us in," she continued, "well, it's my fault actually," she said as she finished buttoning her pants.

Jon grinned. "Your fault, huh? Well now, this sounds like a story I'd like to hear."

"Too bad," Cam said.

"I don't mind," Jeffy said.

"Shut up," Cam barked, making both Jeffy and Jon laugh.

"Our packs are over there," Cam said, pointing toward the tree line.

Nodding, Jon walked with Jeffy and Cam to collect their packs. Jeffy looked the new guy over as they walked. Blond. Tan. Dressed much like herself, in khaki pants and shirt, tan hiking boots, only he wore a wide-brimmed trail hat. The typical Aussie stereotype through and through right down to the endearing accent. He was taller than Cam, and thinner and his smile was big and friendly. If he was Ameritech though, that meant he was deadly.

In only a few minutes they were in Jon's enclosed vehicle and traveling at a high rate of speed up the dirt road, headed toward the southwestern border of Uganda.

"There's a cooler there, in the back," Jon said. "Help yourselves. And there's some sandwiches in the box there on the seat."

"Sandwiches?" Jeffy asked excitedly.

Cam pulled water bottles from the cooler. Most of the ice had melted, but the water was still cold. He handed one to Jeffy along with a sandwich.

Jeffy unwrapped the paper. "Oh, Cam there's meat and cheese." She took a huge bite, closed her eyes. "OMG, I can't believe how good this tastes."

Jon laughed. "OMG?"

"Sometimes the kid in her still comes out," Cam explained.

"Yeah, apparently in you too, but I swear I won't tell anyone that you lost your cool, professional exterior for some—" He stopped because Cam had his gun pressed against Jon's shoulder.

"Say it and I'll shoot you."

"Cam have you gone crazy?" Jeffy cried.

He holstered the gun, sat in the front seat, and washed his bite of sandwich down with the cold water. "Apparently."

Jon laughed. "He wouldn't really shoot me," he explained to Jeffy. "It's a long story. You see, *I* accidentally shot *him* waaay back in training camp."

"You shot him?" Jeffy laughed.

"You find that funny?" Cam asked.

"No, of course not," Jeffy said, still smiling. "You obviously survived, right?"

Jon went on. "Anyway, it was stupid of me. I was careless, but still, everyone teased Cam about it. One day after a particularly hard day and another hard bout of teasing, he gets real close to my ear, you know, and he

whispers, 'One day, Sweet, I'm gonna find an excuse to shoot you.' But ya see, Dr. Kino, after he said it, he smiled, and I knew he wouldn't really shoot me."

"Think again, Jonny boy," Cam said.

"But Jon, why did they tease Cam and not you? I mean, you're the one who messed up, right? *You* shot *him*."

"Yeah, but they tease him because of where I shot him."

"Where did you shoot him?"

"That's enough," Cam stated.

"In the, uh, backside," Jon answered.

Jeffy pressed her lips together to keep the smile from her face. She glanced at Cam who was pouting. "Oh, my poor baby," she said.

"It was in the back of my thigh," Cam corrected.

Jeffy looked at Jon who winked and grinned. "It was in the backside," he whispered. "He was standing right in front of me. I was putting my gun away and it just went off."

Jeffy cleared her throat. "Well—it could've been much more serious. Let's just be thankful it wasn't." She smiled and took another large bite of her sandwich. "So, Jon Sweet, are we still headed to Kashen Village?"

"We are. It's a fairly large town in western Uganda, about five hours away. I will drop you there where you will lay low for a while. I will then come and take you to an airstrip in Rwanda and you will be on your way home."

"A while. How long is a while?" Jeffy asked.

"Not sure," he answered, glancing at Cam. "Jason wants more time to extract information from the mercenaries who were rounded up after they attacked your camp."

"We caught some of them?" Jeffy asked, glancing at Cameron who only seemed to be listening casually.

"That we did, darlin'. Took a few out of commission as they traveled from the village and one from the hotel in Kampala. Also found a few dead. We presumed that was courtesy of you," he said, nodding toward Cam.

Cam nodded. "Does he have any information yet?"

"Let's see, a man named Ormandi gave a villager a gift for Dr. Kino, to show his appreciation for all you've done. Asked the villager to place it in her tent as a surprise. The villager was very distraught to learn that he'd planted a bomb in her tent."

Jeffy's face paled. "Ormandi? He's responsible for the bomb?"

"So it appears. He works for some Russian billionaire who, along with others in his conglomerate, believes you are a menace to the world's

economy. Ormandi says you were warned, given a chance to back off. He says you made it clear when you gave your speech at the hotel that you had plans to move forward. On the other hand, Ormandi swears he did not plan the ambush that took place when you left the hotel, and Jason believes him."

Cam frowned. "This Russian dude have a name?"

"Not yet, but Jason feels sure that he can break these guys and stop the threat."

"One threat."

Jon nodded at Cameron.

"Explain," Jeffy said.

Cam sighed. "Jason feels he can stop the threat the billionaire dude poses. That's one threat. There are two different groups after you, Jeffy. The bomb in the tent and the mercenaries that invaded the medical camp intended to make a kill. The attack on the road was an attempt to take you hostage."

Jon added, "Yeah, Jason says the truck driver who tried to push you over a bridge was with one group and the men who attempted to take you off the beach and mistakenly took your friend, they were working for someone else."

"So, you're saying that there are two different groups of people trying to get me. One group wants me dead and the other wants me as a hostage?"

Cam nodded. "That's what appears to be the case."

"Great. Well, that's just great."

"No problems, luv. Just stay low for a few weeks while Jason works on this. After that, if things are still rough, your entire family will be here along with a strong show of force from Ameritech and possibly the U.S. military, to escort you safely back to sunny California."

"The U.S. military?" Jeffy asked.

"Yeah, like, you're a VIP, luv. The gov hasn't been involved yet because they don't want to ruffle any feathers, but if they have to come and get you, they will."

"They hesitate," Cam began, "because they have to be very careful. The world already thinks of Americans as warmongers who want to rule the world. Unfortunately, there are viable reasons for that. The evil infiltrated our government a long time ago," Cam grumbled. He drank more water, wiped his mouth.

"Let's not get into that," Jon said, "because that road leads nowhere good. By the way, Cam, thumbs-up on warning off the chopper pilot. He got away unscathed. Jason is still investigating how the bad guys knew you

were headed there. He thinks there was at least one spy in the village."

Jeffy shook her head. "I can't believe someone in that village would want to hurt me. I mean, I loved them all so much and I thought they at least cared about me."

"You didn't know them all, Jeffy, and money does crazy things to people," Cam said.

"Logically, I know that. One only has to study a little history to learn that lesson, yet, it hurts more with it affecting me so personally." She shook her head. "I don't know why I'm so surprised."

"Because you see the world through rose-colored glasses," Cam said with a gentle smile. "Still, remember that the villager may not have been bribed with money. He may have been motivated with threats to his family."

Jeffy frowned. "If so, then I hope he's okay now."

"Of course you do," Cam said warmly.

Sighing, Jeffy looked up at Jon. "Any other news?"

Jon pressed his mouth tightly together. "Hart's still MIA."

Cam cursed softly.

"What?" Jeffy asked, alarmed. "Did you just say that Agent Akins is missing?"

Agent Sweet nodded. "Yeah. No one has seen him since he ran toward your tent the other night."

"Oh, no," she cried, her hand covering her mouth and tears coming to her eyes. "Do you think they took him?"

"Well now, we don't know what to think. The good news is we haven't found his body."

Jeffy shook her head. "All this because of me."

"If you'll allow me to say, sweetheart, we all know our job is dangerous. We do it voluntarily. You're important and your work will save millions of lives and every—single—one of us believes in it and in you. On top o' that, I think Hart's alive. If not, we would've come across a body by now."

Jeffy sniffed. "Thank you. H-have you any other news?"

"Uh," Jon said, searching his mind for something positive. "Chris Coley is doing well and on his way back home. Your mum and sister are pretty worried about you. The rest of the family is confident that Cam here will bring you back safe and sound. Your friend, Kim and another friend, Marissa say, and I quote, 'for you to get your fine butt home,' and I must say I concur on that point."

"Watch it, Sweet," Cam muttered.

Jeffy sniffed. "Anything else from my family?"

"Umm," he glanced at Cam. "That's all for now."

"Can I call them?" Jeffy asked.

"Not yet, but *I* can once I'm far enough away from you. I'll give them a message for you and we've got you set up with a computer and you can send encrypted messages through Ameritech."

"Thank you," Jeffy said.

Cam turned in his seat, smiled at her. "It won't be that much longer, Jeffy. Especially when you think about the fact you've been away from them a year and three months already. What's a few more weeks?"

Jeffy nodded. "I was doing okay until about a week ago and all this stuff happened. Now, I just want home."

"Why don't you get some rest?" he offered. "There's a whole seat there just begging for you to stretch out."

"I think I will," she said sadly.

Once Jeffy was settled in, Cam turned to Jon. "Fill me in. How many do we have in the field here? Is there anyone in Kashen Village I can trust and how are we stocked for supplies and ammo?"

With the men's deep voices as soft background music, Jeffy closed her eyes. So much had happened over the past week. Was all the bad stuff behind her? She hoped it was. Still, there was something there, just at the edge of her cognitive thought that warned her of impending doom. She willfully pushed that thought away and concentrated instead on what had happened in the field with Cam.

She had to admit, being with him was like coming home. It felt so right to put her arms around him, to taste his kiss once again. Yet, the big question: is she willing to open her heart and love him again after he hurt her so badly? She'd withhold judgement to hear everything he had to say. For now, all she could think about was when he smiled at her, it made her smile. When he kissed her, she felt it all the way to her toes. She felt a oneness with him that was beyond earthly. She found herself craving that oneness. Being near him now was like a sweet dream that she'd played through her mind over and over that first year after they'd broken up.

Feeling safe for now, she let the music of their conversation lull her to sleep. She awoke when the vehicle rattled over several bumps.

She sat up groggily. Cam was asleep in the front seat, his feet up on the dash.

Jon glanced back at her. "Sorry about that. Road's rough through here. We're almost there."

"I've slept that long?"

"Coming down after an adrenaline rush," he answered.

She nodded. She well knew the effects of adrenaline on the body. Jeffy looked out the window. It was late afternoon, early evening. She glanced over at Cam. "I can't believe he's asleep."

Jon shrugged with a smile. "He trusts me. If he didn't, he wouldn't allow himself to zonk out like that. He trusts me to take care of you, and him, though he'd never admit that."

Jeffy smiled. "It was my fault."

Jon sat up straighter, cleared his throat. "Excuse me?"

"Today, before you found us. I ran out into the field. He caught me and was trying to get me to go back toward the forest, but I took all my clothes off and when I decide to do something I am a force to be reckoned with. I threw myself at him right there in that open field for all to see."

"You know, he would be the first to tell you that *that* is no excuse."

She nodded. "Yeah, but you weren't there. Believe me when I tell you, I made it pretty hard for him to do anything but hold on and enjoy the ride."

Jon coughed. "I do believe you."

Jeffy smiled.

"You know, you're not at all what I expected," Jon said.

"Really? What do you mean?"

"I know you're this, like, genius doctor who's gonna save the world, but truly, you don't talk like I expected, ya know?"

She laughed. "You mean I don't use big words and look down my nose at the rest of the ignoramuses in the world?"

"No, I don't mean it like that," he said quickly. Then he smiled. "Well, actually, yeah."

"I used to do that. Back in school, some kid would make some innocent remark and I'd go off on some scientific explanation for why they were feeling or thinking like they were. They'd just look at me like I was totally weird. It took me some time to realize that there was a time and place to spout my knowledge. Cam was one of the few who remained my friend through it all. He sort of taught me how to act normal, so I could interact with normal people without alienating myself. It meant so much to me, him accepting me the way I am. I didn't have many friends but I could always depend on Cam. That is until—" Her voice trailed off. "Sorry, sometimes I say too much."

"It's okay. I heard about you and Scotty-boy, like being an item back in the day."

"You did? What else did you hear?"

"Uh, not much. That he had to leave to start training and that was pretty

much the end of the relationship. Until now."

"Yeah. Until now."

The vehicle slowed as Jon pointed off to the right. "We're coming into town. That's the primary school there. It's right on the edge of town. They have almost five hundred students."

Jeffy nodded as they passed the brick structure. Her eyes took in the town as they drove slowly. It was larger than she expected, yet the road was roughly paved. The main street divided into two one-way streets going in opposite directions, of course. Many official government buildings and stores lined each side while businesses and what looked like apartment housing occupied the strip of land in the center of the two thoroughfares. There wasn't much traffic, but Jeffy could count at least ten vehicles either driving or parked out in front of small markets.

Jon pointed off to the right again. "There are several streets that way, leading to new neighborhoods with fairly modern homes similar to what you would see in working-class suburbia in America."

"Where will we be staying?" she asked.

"You, my lovelies, will be up here." He drove another mile, turned right and then pointed left. "That's the medical center."

Jeffy saw a large complex of brick buildings. "Wow, now I'd say that's a great facility," she said. "Larger than I expected."

"It *should* be a great facility. It was built with seed money from your foundation. Because of that facility, more people came, more houses were built. The school was built. Teachers, doctors, nurses came, and homes and services had to be provided for them. The town has more than quadrupled in size in the last ten years. The quality of life for people here is way up there on the scale which is bringing more and more people into the area."

"Ten years ago, I was only fifteen years old. I was so caught up in my studies, I didn't realize my foundation was doing so much back then. I just knew the Kino Challenges and about a dozen other events were donating heavily to the cause and that my father had hired several people to help oversee the running of the foundation. I don't remember anything about Kashen Village. I came to Africa to visit several times, but I've never been here."

"You've been here in their hearts, I can tell you that."

"But they don't even know me."

"And they still can't," Cam said as he sat up.

Jeffy smiled. "Hey, sleepy head."

He stretched. "Hey, yourself."

Jon nodded. "There are some homes down here past the medical center.

Most in this neighborhood are doctors, professionals, well-to-do businessmen and there are always several houses available for rent." He turned into a dirt drive. "And here we are."

Jeffy smiled at the small brick home, obviously newly built. It had flowers growing in a tiny bed along the front, accompanied by some lovely greenery. The lawn too, was green. Jeffy turned to Cam. "Oh, this is just so cute."

Cam smiled. "Cute. Right."

Jon ushered them inside. "There's food in the fridge, clothes in the bedrooms, of which there are two. New IDs, passports, also in the bedrooms. You have a new computer, Dr. Kino, since your other one was blown to bits." He gestured toward the television. "You have radio, TV and internet, however, don't use the internet for personal matters, no emails to home or anywhere else and do not sign into any of your social media accounts," he added pointedly to Jeffy. "You can use the encrypted line that goes through Ameritech. Jason will get the message to your family. Got it?"

"I got it."

She looked around. The furnishings were simple yet modern. A sofa, chair and television in the front room. Modern-ish kitchen with a small dining table and chairs against the back window.

"I gotta go. You do what Cam says now," Jon urged Jeffy. "He knows what's best." He held out the keys to Cam. "The ride is yours."

"But how will you—" Jeffy began.

"Agent Holton will be here any minute to pick me up." He nodded. "On that note, Dr. Kino, may I have a private word with you?"

Surprised, Cam glanced at Jon then shrugged. "I'll check out the plumbing," he offered and headed to the bathroom.

Jon reached into the breast pocket of his shirt and pulled out an envelope. "I have a message for you from your father. He asked me to deliver it privately. I'll consider my job done." He handed it to Jeffy.

Jeffy took the envelope quickly, held it to her heart. "Thank you," she said, her eyes moistening. She moved forward, stood on her toes, reached up and kissed his cheek. "Be safe," she added.

He touched his cheek. "I think I'm beginning to understand."

"Understand what?" Jeffy asked.

He smiled. "That it *was* your fault that I caught our Cam with his guard down."

She giggled. "Jon, will you assure my mother and sister that I'm just fine, that Cam is taking good care of me?"

"Of course."

"And tell my mom to remember what I said to her in the car on the way to that press conference. Tell her that no matter how bad it seems, everything is gonna be okay. Tell her to remember it was a message from Jesus. And tell my father that he and I have lots to talk about. Oh, and tell him I'm more determined than ever to get home and see this thing finished, so he needs to be working on the media aspect of things. Oh, and tell my brothers that I'm gonna kick their butts and tell Kimmie I miss her and tell Marissa that she'd better get her act together and come to California when I get home. Just tell them all that I love them and miss them." She smiled. "Would you like me to write all that down?"

Jon laughed, tapping his forehead. "No, actually—hyperthymesia. I think I got it."

"Well now, that's interesting."

"Yeah, it's my superpower."

✞✞✞

Ecclesiastes 3:11

"He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the human heart;
yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

Chapter Eight

"Okay, hand me that wrench," Ricky said to his son.

Seventeen-year-old Eric Kino the Third reached for the wrench while still holding the heavy wooden beam in place. Scooping it up, he handed it to his father.

Ricky quickly tightened the bolts. They were about halfway finished with the Saturday project, which was to build a new swing set and play gym in the backyard of the Kino family homestead.

The old one had long been torn apart by two roughhousing boys, namely Eric and JoJo. Logan was older by the time he'd joined the family. The only thing left of the old gym had been one of the swings which Taylor used even to this day when she was being melancholy, as young teen girls had a tendency to be. Shelley insisted it was time for a new one. Sophia would be three in May and the new babies were fifteen months old and needing something fun and safe to play on when they were at Grandma's house. And so, the elaborate play set was today's project.

Currently, Joey was at Ameritech handling some logistics. Mark, JoJo and Logan were hard at work putting together one of the slides that would attach to the end of the swing set. Shelley had placed herself in charge of the landscaping that surrounded the new equipment. Eric lugged large green plants back and forth as Shelley tried to figure out the perfect spot to place them.

Ricky gave the last bolt a final twist and nodded at his son. "Go ahead and hang the swings and double check the ones with the safety straps for the babies."

"Gotcha," young Eric said.

Ricky smiled as Bree approached. The world revered her. Men fantasized about her. He was one of them. He thanked his lucky stars every day that he'd pushed past her meager defenses and awakened her to the love they shared.

"What are you grinning about?" she asked as she kissed him lightly on the mouth.

"Can't help but smile when I see you," he admitted, snaking his arm around her waist and pulling her in close. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Not in the past four hours."

He gazed into her eyes. "I'm more in love with you now than I was on the day you drugged poor Jeff on the beach and tried to go make a deal with the bad guys."

She laughed. "Will you ever let me forget that?"

"No, and you know why? Because your toughness has always been a turn on for me." He let his hand slip down to the back of her hip.

"Good grief, you guys, will you get a room?" young Eric complained.

Mark, JoJo and Logan snickered as they worked on maneuvering the slide into place.

"I was just gonna suggest that very thing," Ricky answered, bending to nuzzle his wife's cheek.

"Sorry, my love, but I have a guzillion things to do. Breez and Bella are out with their bodyguards picking up some groceries. Taylor is inside doing her best to keep Sophia occupied. And I'm supposed to be reading two different scripts."

"Darn," he muttered. "Maybe later?"

She smiled, ran her hand over his chest to his waist, and tucked her fingers inside the waistband of his jeans. "I'll look forward to it." Patting his chest, she turned and walked away.

He watched her as she went to speak with Shelley about something. He smiled. His family. At one time it had only been his father and him.

Then his father had met Shelley and it was the best thing that ever happened to them both, for along with Shelley, who was the sweetest, fiercest woman in the world, came her children; Mark and Joey and Bree. The former being the best brothers anyone could ever want and the latter becoming his precious wife. And when his dad and Shelley conceived little June Flower, it was like a beautiful and gifted angel had come to bless their family.

June Flower. An odd name to be sure. There was no middle name. June Flower was her first name. The name came about due to Shelley's obsession with dandelions. She'd often declared them her favorite flower. *"They are fresh and happy and free. Oh, so free*," she would say. *"They are sturdy and strong and look like tiny suns. And they never die. They just turn into little fairies and blow away to live another day."*

She'd wanted to name her new baby girl, Dandelion, but they'd all begged her to reconsider. So, she asked what Dandelion would be in French. He'd answered, saying in a thick French accent, "den-dee-liii-own. Or," he'd added, "la petite fleur jaune," which was the French translation of *the little flower yellow*. That had been worked around into June Flower. He sighed.

Thinking about his little sister made him feel anxious. He knew she was with Cameron Wallace, the man who loved her, and if she would forgive him, she'd be able to admit that she loved him too. Ricky felt confident that Cam would deliver Jeffy to them safe and sound. Still, the waiting was excruciating and he had to admit that he, like his father and Shelley, was having impressions of some kind of impending doom. God talk.

Ricky came out of his daydream when his father's cell phone rang. He watched Eric wipe his brow and answer the phone.

"Yeah, Jason, what ya got for us?" Eric said.

Encouraged by his smile and nod of his head, the family gathered to hear what news of Jeffy could be had. After a short question and answer period with Jason, Eric ended the call and looked up smiling.

"Jeffy is safe with Cam in the house in Kashen Village. Agent Sweet said she was healthy and in good spirits. A little tired and very hungry. Apparently, she devoured a couple of sandwiches in seconds. He said Jeffy and Cam seemed to be getting along just fine and she sent messages to us all."

He smiled at his wife. "First, she loves and misses everyone. She told you, Shelley, and you, Bree, that she really is fine and not to worry. And for you in particular Shelley, to remember the message from Jesus in the car that everything was gonna be okay." He nodded at Ricky and Mark. "She said to tell her brothers she's gonna kick your butts, presumably for keeping Cam's secret. And she said she and I will have a long talk when she gets back."

He glanced back at Shelley who had tears streaming down her face. "Aww, hon," he mumbled as he pulled her to him and held her tight. "She's okay. That should make you happy."

"I know, and it does," Shelley said as she sniffed. "I just miss her so much. I need my baby home. Sometimes it feels like I'm never gonna see her again."

"Come on, Mom, don't say stuff like that," Mark admonished. "Didn't she just say there was a Jesus message?"

Eric didn't say anything because he had to admit, sometimes he felt the same way. It scared him that he couldn't shake this feeling that something

bad was about to happen. Still, telling Shelley would cause her no end of worry. He pulled his wife away from him so he could look into her face. "Listen to me, Shelley, she'll get through this and so will we all. Try to think positive. Somehow, someway, it's all gonna work out fine."

She wiped her tears. "Do you really think so?"

He hesitated for only a second. "I really do. Why would Jeffy get a Jesus message if it wasn't true? Have faith, hon."



Cam stood, hands on hips, looking around the house. "So, what do you want to do first?"

Jeffy shrugged. "I think I would like to take a shower and put on some clean clothes."

Cam nodded. "Yeah, that sounds really good. You go first. I'll see what's for din din."

She stood still, looking at him. Taking in his guerrilla-type clothing, his hard body, a streak of dirt on his face making it look even more masculine, if that was possible. His hair was lighter when he was younger, but was darker brown now and was currently slightly mussed, his blue eyes—slightly weary. Cameron. Her Cameron was standing with her in a house in Uganda, Africa, as her protector. Her Cameron whom she'd thought she'd lost forever.

"What?" he asked.

Sighing, she shook her head. "Nothing. Just trying to wrap my head around things." Slowly, she turned and headed to the bathroom.

Cam watched her go. He wondered if she realized she was having mood swings. The old Jeffy was consistently happy, mischievous, positive, carefree, cheerful. This one was pensive and serious with moments of the old self breaking through, like in the meadow earlier today. The current mood is one where she seemed to have the weight of the world on her shoulders. And, he thought, that's because she did.

Still, no matter what was in store for her, from here on out, he would be by her side through it all. He and Jeffy were meant to be.

While she bathed, he went through the house, checking doors and windows, placing weapons in strategic places, locked and loaded.

Next, he found some chicken and vegetables in the refrigerator and began preparing it for stir fry. He was leaning against the counter, opening his second bottle of Bell Lager beer, when Jeffy finally emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel. She padded down the hall and found the bedroom that was meant for her.

A while later she came out dressed in black stretch-type pants that

hugged her body and showed off her muscular curves. She'd paired the pants with a pink jersey shirt with what he thought of as little girly ruffle things at the shoulders. He watched her pad barefoot toward him where he stood next to the fridge, a pleasant smile on her face.

"Smells good," she said.

He shrugged. "Just some chicken and veggies. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, but I would like to go through my routine before I eat, if that's okay. You can go ahead. You don't have to wait for me."

"I'll wait. As a matter of fact, I'll go take my shower while you do your thing."

"Sounds good," she said pleasantly.

He tipped the beer up and finished it off, set the bottle on the counter and moved around the bar toward her, stopping just a few feet from her. He reached out and flicked one of the flounces at her shoulder. "You look nice."

"Thanks. Whoever picked out the clothing did an okay job."

He breathed deeply. "Smell nice too."

"Thanks."

He reached out and grabbed a long tendril of wet hair. "No hair dryer provided?"

She shook her head, smiled. "It will dry soon enough."

He tugged playfully. Returned the smile. "Be right back."

She nodded and watched him tread down the hall. She'd taken time after she'd dressed to read her father's letter. It had helped her to put things in perspective, at least a little bit. Still, it was Cam she needed to hear things from.

Sighing, she found a place on the living room floor and commenced stretching. Once she felt limber, she went through a serious stretching session that included some stretches her father had personally developed. She was stiff and sore and breathed deeply into her muscles, into her body, into her mind. She stopped though, because she didn't feel comfortable. She glanced past the small dining table to the window, eyeing the green grass in the backyard. The sun was getting low in the sky. Without thinking, she opened the back door and stepped out into the early evening light.

A smile spread across her face as she felt the coolness of the grass beneath her feet and the soft, warm wind blowing through her damp hair, cooling her. Now, this was more like it, she thought as she continued her routine.

Twenty minutes later, Cam emerged, freshly showered and dressed only in blue jeans. He immediately spotted Jeffy outside. Uttering a soft curse,

he grumbled under his breath as he headed out the back door, his eyes scanning the small yard and the shrubbery that lined the back of the flimsy fence.

She was in a monstrosity of a pose. He knew the Kinos didn't actually practice yoga, but they did their own version of stretches, some that were much harder, and none that worshiped Hindu Gods. Right now, the only thing touching the ground were her hands, one of which was tucked between her legs which were stuck out in the air to one side. She didn't move when he stomped over to stand in her line of vision. She'd come outside with no respect for the danger she may be in. It made him want to place his bare foot on the side of her pretty little head and give a shove. The only reason he didn't was out of respect for the amazing skill and strength it would take to hold that position for any amount of time.

He waited. Finally, she drew a deep breath and slowly eased her body out of the position, and to his amazement, pressed straight up into a handstand which she held for several seconds. When she came down from that she went into some poses he could actually do; a chest-press arch, the steeple, the inchworm, and finally stood. Turning her head toward him she smiled and he couldn't find it in him to be angry.

He did try to scowl at her, however. "What do you call what you just did?"

"Uh, stretching?"

"I know that. I meant, what is the name of that crazy pose?"

"Possibilities?"

"Well, obviously, it's possible."

"No, I mean, that is what Dad calls, 'possibilities'."

Cam nodded. "Makes sense. I mean, you were tangled like a pretzel. If that's possible, I guess all things are."

She smiled. "In Christ, all things are. It's pretty advanced. I saw you doing some stretches a few mornings ago."

"I try to keep it simple."

Jeffy laughed. "Doing arm-stand pushups in a tree fifty feet in the air is not simple."

He shrugged. "If you can balance on the ground you can balance in a tree, the only difference is in your mind."

Jeffy nodded. "True."

"And Jeffy, watching you do what you just did," Cam went on, "you should be teaching."

"I am a student in all things, but thank you for the compliment. Some people are meant to teach. I am not a teacher."

"Except in medicine," Cam said.

She nodded. "Yes, except in medicine. I just hope the world is ready to learn."

He gently took her by the arm. "On another subject, I'm gonna have to ask you to not come outside by yourself. Especially when I'm in the shower and can't hear what's going on."

"Nothing was going on."

"Well, lucky for both of us. Jeffy, will you please cooperate?"

"I'll try." Smiling, she leaned toward him, reached out to place her palm on his bare mid-section. "Nice abs."

He rolled his eyes. "Don't think I don't realize you're trying to change the subject."

She grinned and shrugged. "Well, you do have nice abs, but I said I'll try. Now, I still have my Tai Chi, will you accompany me?"

"What makes you think I know Tai Chi?"

"Did my father help train you?"

"Yes."

"Then you know Tai Chi."

He grinned. "You just think you're so smart."

She grinned back. "That's cuz I am."

They stood side by side and went through her father's personally choreographed version of Tai Chi Chuan. The movements were fluid, graceful, beautiful. Jeffy glanced at Cameron beside her and felt a mingling of spirit just like she always felt when her family moved together on the beach at sunrise. Her heart felt open and compassionate. She felt as if she were being pulled to Cam, as if they were each part of the whole, as if they were one. This was lovely, the two of them side-by-side, moving in tandem, and she was sad as their dance came to an end.

Usually, the moment she finished Tai Chi she would sink down to pray and meditate for fifteen minutes or so depending on her time constraints, but she didn't want to press Cam for more time. To her surprise though, he sat down on the ground beside her, folded his legs into a full lotus and looked up, waiting for her.

She settled herself beside him and together they slipped into a simple silent meditation, concentrating on their breathing, emptying their minds of thought so they could hear God's voice, allowing their breathing to slow and synchronize of its own accord. Jeffy was glad to let go and think of nothing but her breathing. "Let go and let God."

Behind her eyelids she could see flashes of light, swirling in a spiral. First the light was a soft yellow, and then it gradually turned green, then

blue and finally violet. The swirling colors gave her the feeling that she was moving out into space. Out into the universe. Out to commune with God. Her body began to vibrate as if she were lying in one of those massage recliners. Her heartbeat quickened as a vision began to form like a movie being shown on the inside of her forehead.

Like time-lapse photography, everything was in fast motion. So fast she could hardly see what was happening. There was traveling across vast expanses of water, people coming and going from her parents' home. And there was danger. She thought she saw a woman raising her hands in defense of being struck, but it was so fast it was hard to tell. There were bloody faces and tears flowing from eyes and hands reaching out swirling all together into a giant whirlpool.

Suddenly cold and lonely, she waited to see if maybe there was a happy ending to this vision. Just when she thought she would give up, a warming light appeared on the horizon and an angel drew near. He was magnificent and strong and filled with light. He smiled at her, reached out, took her hand and placed it in the hand of another. Jeffy was startled to feel that her hand actually was being held. Opening her eyes and turning her head, she blinked at Cameron's ultra blue eyes staring back at her. Her head lowered to gaze at their hands, which were indeed clasped together.

"Did you..." she began. "I mean, why did you..."

"Why did I take your hand while you were in the middle of a deep meditation?" He gave a slight shrug. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you. I had an overwhelming urge to reach out and take your hand. It was as if I felt you needed me and I couldn't stop myself."

"Then you didn't see..." She stopped again. Shook her head.

"Didn't see what?"

"Never mind. I had a weird vision."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"There was pain and blood and bad stuff happening but I couldn't really tell what it was all about because everything was moving so fast. And then, an angel came and..."

"And?"

She blew out a breath. "And everything was better. That's all."

"And then I messed everything up by touching you."

She smiled. "No, not at all. You just surprised me, that's all. Um, let's eat. I guess everything is cold by now."

He rose, pulled her up. "We can warm it up." He stilled, taking a moment to watch the sun sink down below the tops of the trees. Turning, he eyed Jeffy as she watched the same thing. "You're beautiful, June

Flower."

She blinked up at him. "Thank you, Cam." Then she flashed a quick smile. "You ain't half bad yourself."

He tugged her toward the house. "You got a lot of your brothers in you, you know that?"

She laughed. "How could I not?"

Inside, Cam donned a T-shirt and went to work in the kitchen. It didn't take long to warm the chicken and vegetables. They sat at the tiny dining table next to the window that looked over the backyard. Cam washed his food down with another beer. Jeffy sipped on water, always doing her best to keep her body pure. As they ate they chattered about nothing of great importance: African wildlife, the recently passed Super Bowl, the ab contest back at the monastery. They laughed and joked and laughed some more.

Cam told her of some of the stunts her brothers pulled during his training. Jeffy talked about her desperate need to see her new nieces. Finally, the talk got around to her winning the Nobel Prize, which took them to the incident shortly thereafter when she and Kimmie were pushed off the bridge, which took them to Cam being called in, which took them to the rehashing of everything that had happened since the night she spoke at the hotel in Kampala.

Jeffy, as usual, talked a mile a minute and Cam listened, realizing her need to vent.

"And then, there I am, following along behind you. I can't believe I was courageous enough to follow you into the jungle," she said with a chuckle. "Especially since the last time I followed you into a wooded area we became hopelessly lost."

"Uh, let me stop you right there," he said indignantly. "First, you got the facts wrong. The first time, you didn't follow me into the woods. I followed you and saved your scrawny neck, by the way."

Jeffy giggled. "That's true. You saving my neck seems to have become an ongoing issue."

"I think it must be my calling in life."

The words were said softly. Jeffy looked up into his eyes for a few moments and then broke the spell by laughing. "Okay, but you have to admit, you did get lost."

He smiled. "Hopelessly—as you stated earlier."

"I knew my father would find us."

"And that he did," Cam said, remembering the embarrassing circumstances. They'd been caught right in the middle of testing their

newfound attraction. He'd been lying on top of her, kissing her with much enthusiasm and Grandmaster Kino had jerked him away from Jeffy, lifting him off her like he was nothing more than a grade-school kid. He had him suspended in the air, his back against a tree while mother, three brothers and police looked on. Cam shuddered just thinking about it.

Jeffy took his hand. "Aww, poor Cam. Don't feel bad. You were only sixteen and no match for my father."

He shook his head to clear it of the image. He was not a kid anymore. The past five years had honed him into a man and no one would be able to do that to him now.

"Anyway," Jeffy went on. "At least you didn't get lost this time. I have to admit, I was pretty impressed. You've taken such good care of me. You've become hardened and skilled and yet..." She stopped, her mind wandering back to the field of butterflies.

"And yet?" he prodded.

"And yet, being hardened didn't stop you from appreciating the beauty of that butterfly field or, I might add, from taking time to really enjoy the luscious moment." She blinked up at him.

His mind moved to Jeffy dancing with the butterflies floating around her. Unfortunately, his body reacted to the memory. He couldn't stop himself from reaching across the table and cupping her beautiful face in his hand, stroking his thumb across her cheek. "You were the most beautiful thing in that field today."

She smiled, took his hand in hers, moved it down to her mouth and kissed his calloused palm.

He watched as she batted her eyes at him then kissed each of his fingers. The feelings washed over him in ripples of pleasure. Giving her a patient look, he pulled his hand away, gathered the dishes and headed for the kitchen, not missing her pout.

She rose. "You cooked. I'll get the dishes."

He didn't argue. Simply stepped aside and let her have at it while he checked the back door. Back in the living room, he flipped on the television, searched the few channels looking for news. When he found some on UTV, he listened for a few minutes to what could be called the atrocities of the world, found nothing about the missing Dr. Kino and turned it off.

Sweet told him the news was saying that there had been a guerrilla raid on the medical camp and Dr. Kino was missing. The world believes that not even her family knows where she is. Jason felt that would be best in order to keep her family safe.

Finished in the kitchen, Jeffy eased down beside him on the small sofa. "Nothing interesting on TV?"

"Nope."

"There's something interesting sitting right here," she offered.

He smiled at her. "Most definitely," he said, turning toward her so he could look at her beautiful self.

"It seems a miracle," she uttered softly.

"What does?"

"Sitting here with you. I missed you so much over the past five years. I've felt so empty for so long. I fantasized that you would come walking in my door. And now, here you are."

He touched her face. "I'm sorry I hurt you, Jeffy. Truly sorry. I never meant to. I didn't know it would be so hard for you. I thought you would be sad for a few weeks and then just write me off."

"You underestimate yourself, Cam."

"I know. Your father and I have been 'round and 'round about those feelings. Of course, he believes they stem from my parents' lack of appreciation for their only child."

"Fools they be."

He chuckled. "Thanks for the support."

Smiling, she moved close, leaned her head against his chest, forcing him to move his arm and place it around her shoulders. "You're welcome."

Her hand moved back and forth over his chest and Cam swallowed hard at the gentle caress.

"You're much brawnier than you used to be."

"You're as soft as ever."

She raised her head. "I am not soft," she argued.

He chuckled. "Well, I didn't mean to offend, so let me rephrase. You are definitely a hard-body, Jeffy, but your skin is soft and supple and very feminine."

She settled again. "Oh. Okay. That's good."

He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"I heard that."

"What? I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to."

He laughed. "Are you reading my mind?"

She looked up at him. "Actually, no. I've tried, but I can't. I'm not sure why."

"Part of my training was to block any psychic type intrusion. I guess it's working."

"Oh. Wow. They think of everything."

"Does it bother you?" Cam asked.

"I don't know. Maybe a little. It intrigues me."

"I like it."

"Why?"

"It puts me on a more even playing field."

She thought about that a moment. "Okay. I think I understand. Is it permanent or can you lower your defenses?"

"I can lower it if I want. It's not like I have to mentally erect a barrier every minute of the day."

"Lower it. I want to try to read your mind."

"I don't think that would be advisable right now."

"Why? Scared of what I'll see?"

"No."

"Then let me in." She swung her leg across him so that she faced him, straddling his legs, her hands on his shoulders. She gazed deeply into his eyes.

Sighing, he closed his eyes and opened them. Her brown eyes blinked at him, as if in slow motion. Frown lines appeared on her brow. She leaned forward and placed her forehead against his. He heard her make a soft sound in the back of her throat.

"You love me," she murmured. "You want me."

Pulling back, she looked again into his eyes, then glanced briefly at his lips.

"Well, it doesn't take a psychic to know that," he said with a smile. "Besides, it doesn't matter what I want," he said softly.

"Yes it does," she answered as she leaned close, offering her mouth to him.

He had no qualms in taking the opportunity to kiss her. His lips claimed hers. The entire world revered Dr. June Flower Kino. She'd received marriage proposals from several of her male fans. According to her brothers, who'd enjoyed rubbing it in, she'd been propositioned by a prince, two billionaires and hundreds of college students. But Jeffy—Jeffy belonged to him.

His hands fisted in her hair, holding her head at just the right angle as he kissed her. She moaned again, and he pulled away briefly and dove back in. Finally ending the kiss, he eased up and away from her.

"No," she cried, reaching for him.

He didn't give in. The kiss was enough torture for now, he thought.

Standing, he pulled her up, turned her around and walked her down the

hall toward the bedrooms. She was surprised when he stopped at her door, opened it and pushed her through. She turned and reached for him. He grabbed her face and gave her a quick, firm kiss before he pushed her away.

"Get some rest, Jeffy. It's been a hard week. It's been a hard day. Rest."

He shoved her back a bit so he could close the door. Drawing a deep breath, he turned and went to his own room.



Jeffy was unable to sleep. Her feelings for Cam were tearing her apart. She'd wanted him to make love to her earlier, but he hadn't. In the butterfly field he'd said something about wanting her to give herself to him only in love. She *had* loved him, in that moment. Yet, she knew that wasn't what he'd meant. He was talking about a deep, abiding love. The kind that lasts a lifetime. Did she truly love him that way? There had been a time when she thought she did. Did she now? Right now, she wasn't even sure that she had forgiven him for leaving her so abruptly all those years ago. Then again, he hadn't yet explained everything to her, so how could she forgive him?

Reaching under her pillow she pulled out the letter from her father and read it over again.

Daughter,

Let me begin by telling you how deeply your mother and I love you. We are so very proud of you.

I know at this time you may be confused about some things. One of them may be the reappearance of Cameron Wallace in your life. I want you to know that the reason he left you was entirely my fault. I encouraged him to do it. You must believe that I had only your well-being in mind. Hear what he has to say. Open your heart and mind and seek the truth. I realize you probably feel betrayed. If we, your brothers and I, lose your love over this, then we will have gambled and lost. But I have more faith in you than that.

Your mom didn't know about Cam, about why he left you and about his training with Jason. It will probably please you to know that I am having to deal with her about this just as Ricky is having to deal with Bree.

Listen, honey, until you get home, you live in our hearts. Remember when we used to practice your psychic skills and you could tell which part of the house I was in? Then later, you were actually able to tell whose house I was at, an amazing feat. Well, it doesn't matter that you are halfway across the world. You can still connect to my mind. Just reach out with your thoughts, sweetie. I'll be there with you.

For now, let Cam protect you. Obey him. I know you probably hate

those words, but he is highly trained and I trust him with my only daughter. That should tell you something.

We are all very much looking forward to the moment we can see your beautiful smile again. We miss you, Jeffy, and we are all anxiously awaiting our family reunion.

All my love,

Dad

Sighing, Jeffy folded the paper and tucked it back under her pillow. It was time to get some answers.

Jeffy slowly opened the door to her bedroom and peered out. The house was dark and quiet. She turned and headed to Cam's room, eased open his door and stepped inside. The room was completely black. She made her way to the bed, climbed on, balancing on her knees and listened. She couldn't hear him breathing.

"Cam?" she whispered, hoping she wouldn't startle him and have him blow her head off with the gun he usually kept nearby.

There was no answer. Leaning over, she reached out. Cam was not in bed. She turned and headed back out into the hall.

"Looking for me?" he said softly.

Startled, she flicked on the hall light. Cam sat cross-legged on the floor next to her bedroom door.

"Cam, you scared me. Have you been sitting there all along?"

"You mean since you left your room and went looking for me?"

"Yes."

He smiled. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I wanted to see the look on your face when you realized I wasn't in bed."

"Why?"

"I guess it's a sign of a sick sense of humor," he chuckled.

"Huh. Now who's like my brothers?" She sat down, her back against the opposite wall, her legs crossed. "So, what are you doing sitting out here in the hall?"

He shrugged. "Can't sleep in my room with you so far away. Anything could happen. I don't want to be too far away when it does."

"*If* it does," she said.

"Yeah. *If*. So, what did you need?"

"I want to know why."

"Why?"

"Yes, why. The other day you said you had to make a clean break from how things were between us. You said our relationship had to change. Why? I loved you. You loved me. Everything was fine. Why did anything have to change?"

He drew a deep breath. It was the time of reckoning. "Because I realized I was truly in love with you. We met so young, ya know, I figured our relationship would die out. I figured the flame would extinguish and then we'd both go our separate ways, richer for having known each other. You know like, we'd never forget our first love and would speak about it to the person we would finally end up marrying."

"Okay, so you realized you truly loved me. I'm trying hard to understand but I just don't get it. If you truly loved me, why did everything have to change?"

"I'm getting to that. Just listen. So, as I neared my twenty-second birthday, I realized I didn't ever want our relationship to end. I wanted to be with you for the rest of my life, but it wasn't gonna happen the way our relationship was."

"The way it was? How..."

He held up his hand. "Just listen, Jeffy. Please just try to slow your mind and listen."

"Are you talking down to me?"

"How does it feel?"

"What the heck is that supposed to mean?"

"Jeffy, please, just listen."

Drawing a deep breath, she nodded.

"Even though I loved you and wanted to be with you, I knew a marriage between us could never work and I knew that, because everything wasn't alright, as you say. I was unhappy."

"You were?"

He looked into her eyes. "Come on now, Jeffy, given your talents, I can't imagine that you didn't know that."

Slowly, she nodded as she remembered. "One time, I did my mind-melding thing with you and was surprised by how sad you seemed. I didn't know why. I just figured it was something to do with your parents or school, or football."

"I didn't even know myself why I was so unhappy. I was so confused and that was leading to depression. Finally, out of desperation, I went to your father to ask for help."

"I didn't know that."

"I didn't want you to know."

She sighed. "Okay. And so, he helped you?"

"He helped me more than I ever imagined he could. It was as if he could see into my soul. He is such a good man, Jeffy. I can't tell you how much respect I have for him. I mean, really, I can't even put it into words. He and I together, we figured things out."

She started to speak but he held his hand up. "Listen."

She shut her mouth and nodded.

"He helped me to understand that in a relationship, in a *healthy* relationship, both partners must have not only love for each other, but they must have a good dose of respect and admiration for each other. I had so much respect and admiration for you. Who wouldn't? You can do anything. You're brilliant in pretty much every aspect of life. And then there's me. What did I have to offer that you could respect and admire? Nothing."

"That's not true, I..." She stopped at his heavy sigh and the shaking of his head. "Sorry. Please go on."

"Thank you. Really, Jeffy, there was no way I could hold a candle to your intelligence. Physically, I was supposedly this big, strong football player, but your exceptional martial arts training meant you could probably kick my butt, and if not, you could pretty much kick anyone else's. Which meant, you didn't need me. Talent-wise, you play piano like a virtuoso, along with several other instruments, you dance, you're an artist, you're an amazing speaker. When you talk, people listen.

"Even financially, I had nothing. I wanted to be with you for the rest of my life, but I had absolutely nothing to offer. I had nothing to bring to the table. There were times that I felt totally subservient. Actually, that was most of the time."

"But..."

He held his hand up. "It was like, you were the princess and I was your lapdog that you stroked and played with until you had to put it down to go do more important things. Yes, the lapdog would be there for you when you got back, wagging his tail, licking your toes and eager to please. But, Jeffy, I didn't want to be your lapdog. I wanted to be your companion. I wanted to be your partner, your equal, so, I needed to change the way you saw me and, to be fair, the way I saw myself. Your dad helped me to see that the only way to do that was to get completely away from you, make the change, meaning, make something of myself, and then come back into your life."

Jeffy's eyes brimmed with unshed tears. "I, I didn't mean to treat you like a lapdog. I didn't realize..."

"I'm not blaming you. It's just the way the relationship went and most of that had to do with my own lack of self-respect. Still, in order to change

things so that one day I could have a real chance at happiness with you, I knew I had to do something drastic. Your dad was the mastermind. He was the one who understood that I couldn't remain with you and change gradually. I had to make an impact.

"He was the one who spoke with Jason and made me the offer of becoming one of the first of Jason's Elite. He knew—we both knew, that what we had planned would hurt you initially, and because of that, it was the hardest decision I've ever made. Your dad was confident, though, that in the end, it would result in your happiness. And, yeah, mine as well. He felt confident that your brilliant mind would understand why I had to do what I did, and that you would be able to forgive me for hurting you."

He looked at her face, now wet with her tears and because she didn't try to interrupt anymore, he went on.

"Jeffy, back then, if I had asked you to marry me, you probably would've said 'yes,' but we wouldn't have been happy. There would've been a power struggle. In our old relationship, you were used to being on top. Your mind was dominant. I would've bucked up and tried to make it a more equal partnership and we would've begun sniping at each other. The lapdog would've made too much noise. It would've been like, 'Be quiet and I'll love you and stroke you,' says the princess. 'No,' says the lapdog, 'I want to make some of the decisions.' 'Nonsense,' says the princess. 'You're just a lapdog.'"

Her face crumpled. He sighed. "Sorry if the analogy hurts you, however, it seems to accurately convey the way I felt and I thought it was important for you to understand."

She sniffed, used her pinky to wipe at a tear. "Do you still feel like a lapdog?"

"No. Definitely not. You see, I've made something of myself. When I was going through the hell of training, I had to dig deep to see what I had in me. I found myself and I liked what I found. I began to love and appreciate myself. I made it through training that only a few men have been able to complete. I've been educated in covert ops that only a few people in the world would ever know or understand. I can speak twelve languages. And there's much more—but I'll leave you to discover all the parts of the new me. The real question is, Jeffy, do you now see me differently?"

"I do," she said without hesitation. "Since the night you pulled me into the jungle, I've been walking behind you trying to decide if I like this new, hardened version of the boy I once loved."

"And?"

"And of course, you are still you. And I never stopped loving you. Still,

I do see you differently now. You're like someone I need to get to know again. I understand everything you said and I suppose you accomplished your goal, because I have to say, I do have a great deal of respect for you now. You've been impressive to say the least. You're confident, you think and act quickly, you're much more serious. I realize, on this journey, I'm looking up to you. I'm depending on you completely to take care of me and to get me back home to my family. Which means, I give you as much respect and admiration as I do my brothers or even my father. But Cam, I feel terrible that I treated you so badly before."

"You didn't..."

"No, now you listen. How uppity of me to not understand what you were feeling. Your lapdog analogy is hurtful to me because it hits the nail on the head. I didn't mean to diminish you as a person. Yet I did. I realize now I did and you had every right to be unhappy. Thank goodness you had the guts to try to make things right between us. Thank goodness you loved me enough to go through what you did. You took a huge gamble. You sacrificed everything so that one day we could be together and be really and truly happy. I'm glad you did, Cam. I'm so proud of what you've done, what you've accomplished."

Cam smiled. She will probably never know just how much her words meant to him.

"And you know what else?" she continued. "I'm really relieved that my father and brothers didn't betray me. Instead, they too were gambling that you would succeed and would eventually be able to bring me happiness."

"They had a hard time dealing with it, but in order for any of this to work, you couldn't know about it."

"I get it now. So, Cam?"

"Yeah?"

"I think I do love you. I think I love you more than I can say."

"Aww, Jeffy. I love you too, baby."

He stood, pulled her up and into his arms.

"Cam," she whispered against his chest. "Can you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive, Jeffy. Like I said, I allowed myself to slip into that subservient position. As your dad and I worked through things I came to realize that a lot of that had to do with my parents' uncaring attitude making me feel like I wasn't a person worthy of respect. Add to that the fact that I was in awe of you—and your family for that matter. I allowed you to take the lead. I gave away my power. Now, I've learned to stand in my power."

"And now, you're in the lead."

"No, Jeffy, that's not what I want either. We're partners. You take care of saving the world and I'll keep you safe to do it."

She smiled up at him. "I can deal with that. Cam, I can't tell you how much better I feel. I mean, I feel a lot of relief, like a weight has been lifted off my chest."

"Well, you know what your dad always says..."

"Communication is the key," they mimicked in unison.

"Oh, Cam, you're back. You're really back."

"Yeah, I am," he murmured as he slowly bent his head and kissed her softly.

Jeffy sighed, feeling the warmth of his breath on her cheek, tasting his essence, smelling the simple, clean maleness of him, feeling the power in his hand that was pressed against her back. She could feel the pounding of his heart.

"God knows, I do love you, Jeffy," he said into her ear.

She shivered with the chills it caused. "I love you, Cam," she answered. "I love you, I love you, I love you. It feels so good to say it."

"Then keep saying it. I won't ever tire of hearing it."

❁

Jeffy watched him sleep. She'd invited him into her bed, not for the usual reasons a woman might do that. It was just that she couldn't very well allow him to sleep in the hall just outside her bedroom door while the "princess" was all cozy in her bed. It's not like they hadn't just spent many nights side by side, in a tree, in a tent, in a cave, in a cabin.

She sighed. This powerful man beside her *was* Cam, but he was different too. This man was hard, confident, not so willing to let her have her way. She liked it. Had he always been this masculine? Maybe because of the flaws in their old relationship, she hadn't seen him for the prize he was, because this man in front of her was definitely a specimen to behold.

Sitting up, she couldn't help herself, she had to touch him. Reaching out, she placed her palm on his chest over his heart, hoping his training wouldn't kick in and he accidentally kill her. He didn't move at first. She had an inkling that he wasn't asleep but only assessing the danger before he opened his eyes. She moved her hand over his chest and lower to his rock-hard abs.

"Enough," he said, his voice gravelly.

Rising up, he pushed her back down on the bed and moved over her, kissing her softly before he gently stroked her cheek.

"It feels so good to have you near me again," she murmured. "I've missed you so much. Ya know, there were times I pretended you were still

with me."

"As sweet as that sounds, there's no need to pretend ever again, Jeffy. Unless I die trying to protect you."

"Don't say that!"

He chuckled. "I have no intention of letting that happen."

"There is power in words, Cam. You know that."

"Sorry. I'll try to do better."

"I've been watching you sleep."

"Is that what you think?"

She giggled. "Well, I had a feeling you may not have been completely asleep."

He smiled. "And what were you thinking while you thought you were watching me 'sleep'?" he asked.

"I tried to read you and couldn't get in, so that was my first hint that you weren't asleep. And after that I was thinking, well, that you are definitely all man now."

He kissed the top of her head. "Jeffy, please, you don't have to stroke my ego."

"Well, maybe I was trying to do that just a little bit, because, I mean, I've just learned how I pretty much took you for granted. Really though, without trying to stroke your ego, the difference in you, it is amazing. I think I'm addicted to you."

He chuckled, rubbed his hand over her back. "I would never complain about that, Jeffy. I went five years without you and the withdrawal was both emotionally and physically painful. You are an addiction that I will never overcome."

Jeffy sighed. "I feel so happy, Cam."

He smiled. "It makes me happy to hear you say that."

"It almost doesn't feel right, you know? I mean feeling so happy."

"How could feeling happy not seem right?"

"Well, Mirembe and her babies, they're gone. Balon and Sanyu, two of the most beautiful souls I've ever met, they're gone. Murdered because of me. And Hart. What happened to him? How could I have all those people in my heart and still find a way to be happy?"

Cam was silent.

"No answer, huh?"

"Well, I was trying to think of what your father would say to that."

"And?"

"I think he would say something like, you can't control everything that happens in life and if you try, you will only set yourself up for failure,

because we simply can't control everything. We can't control what bad people choose to do. And we can't save everyone, though we can try. I also think he would tell you that you can't live in the past. The only real time is the present moment and we should live each moment as filled with love and happiness as possible."

"Yeah, I think that sounds a lot like what he would say. For just a moment or two, I was living in the present and felt happy. Yet then almost immediately, their deaths came back into my mind."

"Well, he would also say that mourning has stages and it takes time to move through them and that when there is something to be sad about, go ahead and be sad. Experience it fully, and then eventually, you'll be able to let it go."

She snuggled closer. "Yep, he would say that too. I'm gonna send an encrypted email to my dad and tell him how I'm feeling about everything. Let's see how close his response is to what you just said."

Cam smiled. "Okay, let's see. If anything, it'll be a good lesson."

Jeffy tilted her head up and kissed him softly on the lips before cuddling in under his chin.

Sighing, he allowed himself to relax for the first time in five years.

✞✞✞

1 Peter 3:7

"Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding,
giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered."

Chapter Nine

It wasn't the sun that woke him, even though it was up. It wasn't his growling stomach, or even the cool air that moved over his body due to the covers having been pulled away. He kept his eyes closed, experiencing every second to its fullest. Jeffy, like earlier in the middle of the night, had her soft hands on his chest.

His heart beat faster as he felt her lips brush against him and he couldn't hold back the soft moan in the back of his throat. His thoughts when she convinced him to stay in her room with her had been innocent. At the moment, they were not so innocent. Sighing, he rose up, pushed her away and headed to the bathroom, smiling at her disappointed whine.

When he came back, he was freshly showered and dressed. He sat down on the side of the bed, leaned over and kissed her.

"Good morning, sweetheart."

Jeffy smiled. "Good morning."

"How do you feel?"

"Hungry. Famished. Starved."

He laughed. "You always did have a good appetite."

"I think I'll make some breakfast."

"Sounds good."

"And then, well, I really need to do some work on the computer, though I feel more inclined to lure you back to bed."

"Intriguing and tempting," Cam quipped. "Intriguing because I'm pretty sure that because of what you confessed the other night, about how you lost your virginity, you probably try very hard to not repeat your mistakes, because I know you love God and always want to do His will. So, I'm not sure why you want to lure me to bed. Tempting, because, well, I mean, you are Jeffy Kino. But, no can do. I have some preparations to make and some business to take care of."

"You're leaving?" she asked.

"Yes, but not without you. I can't leave you here alone and I need to check out the town and all possible escape routes."

"I thought that's what you and Jon were discussing."

"We were, but things can change and I can't take any chances."

"Okay, so we're going on a field trip. That's cool."

He smiled. "So, how about that breakfast?"

"Right away, sir."

His eyes followed her as she left the room. Cam shook his head. He will never get enough of looking at her. Jeffy's tight, athletic, little body was an amazing sight. A specimen to be admired. Add that to her super brain and many talents, she was unreal. A super-being. Wonder woman. A bright light in this very dark world. How could anyone even consider trying to put out her light? And for what? For money. Greed.

He wiped his mind of the negative thoughts. Right now, he was happy. Jeffy accepted his love, accepted him back into her life and admitted that she still loves him. At this moment, he thought with a smile, all is right with the world.

❁

One week later...Sunday Evening
Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Elizabeth Tanner, known to most as Lizzy, paced back and forth from the far side of her giant kitchen where the kitchen table was, past the island to the side door that opened up onto a delightful side yard. That little area used to be the children's play yard and was now a decadent flower garden, or would be in about a month. It being March, all that bloomed right now were some cheerful daffodils, crocuses and early hyacinths. Today though, Lizzy's thoughts were far from flowers.

She was terrified. She had to talk to her husband. She had to tell him how she felt and why she felt that way. More importantly, it had to be tonight. Her hands wrung in anticipation, and the feeling in the pit of her stomach had her clutching her abdomen.

She had very little time to speak to him. He'd gone into the office today, even though it was Sunday, because he was leaving for California in the morning and he had to wrap up some details and leave the southeast division of Ameritech in the good hands of his second in command. From California, Keegan would be off to some place overseas near Russia on a special mission. All week long Lizzy had tried to find the time and the courage to speak to her husband, but she'd run out of time. She had to talk to him today and over the past few hours she'd worked herself into a frenzy.

Then Maddie Lewis had called, insisting that she had to make an announcement to everyone and that they all must come to dinner at the Inn at 7:00. Lizzy tried to beg off, but Maddie was eighty-something years-old and when she insists, pretty much everyone obeys. Besides, Maddie, and Maddie's granddaughter, Lisa, had been so good to her and Keegan and their six children.

Right now, three of those children were off at college, one in Tennessee, one in Florida and one in New York. The other two college-aged girls attended nearby Gordon College. Today though, they'd been visiting a friend's mother who was ill, but were due home any minute. Her youngest child, fourteen-year-old Gabriel, had run over to the Stewart ranch to help Laynah with the horses because her father, the man Gabe called 'Uncle Chaz,' had to go help a family who'd had an electrical fire in their home.

Lizzy glanced at the clock. It was already a little after six. Chewing on her lip, she gazed out the kitchen window that was at the front of the house. She drew a deep breath when she finally saw Keegan's car racing up the drive. She took a few steps backward, until she hit the island. Her heart beat fast and hard. She watched the garage door raise. Watched him pull in. Heard the garage door lower. Heard him open the mudroom/laundry room door. She moved to the center of the kitchen.

Keegan came through the laundry room, turned right and entered the kitchen. His brow was furrowed, and he was obviously preoccupied. His eyes met Lizzy's and he stopped and pasted a smile on his face. "Hi there, Lizbet."

She ran to him, landing solidly against his chest. His arms immediately came around her. "Oh, now this is nice," he said, trying to keep the mood light. "Do I get a kiss too?"

Lizzy raised her face and he bent down and kissed her mouth. He'd intended a light, sweet kiss, but Lizzy's desperation came through. She opened herself to him completely and Keegan took what she offered, deepening the kiss until he couldn't suppress the moan. He tried to pull away a second to catch his breath, but she wouldn't let him.

Next thing he knew, he was lifting her up into his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist.

Somewhere in the back of their minds they heard the front door open. "Hey Dad, what's th—" Lily stopped.

Keegan immediately placed Lizzy back on the floor. Lizzy spun around, her cheeks pink. "Oh, hi girls," she said breathlessly, smoothing her hair.

Lily's twin, Daisy, grinned from ear to ear. "Well now, I guess we have

pretty bad timing."

"Or they do," Lily offered.

"Hello my sweet angels," Keegan said. "Have I told you lately how much I love you and how grateful I am to be your father?"

They giggled. Not because what he said was funny, but because he said it all the time. They too were grateful. They'd never known their own father. Keegan was all they knew and they were so grateful for the love and care he gave to them, to their sisters, and to their mom.

The girls moved through the kitchen, each grabbing glasses of milk and a handful of cookies. "We'll, uh, be in our room," Lily said.

"Yeah, with the door closed," Daisy added as Lily giggled.

Keegan watched them leave and then smiled down at his wife, expecting to see her ready to take up where they'd left off, but she wasn't smiling. Instead, tears welled in her eyes.

"Lizzy?" Keegan said softly, pulling her against his chest. "What is it, sweetheart?"

She pulled away, walked to the entrance to the front hall, turned and walked halfway back, drew a deep breath. "You can't go," she blurted out.

His brows rose. He hadn't expected her to say that. Whatever reason she had for saying it, he had a feeling this was about to be a difficult conversation, because he definitely had to go. He waited, thinking she probably had much more to say. He was right.

"I said you can't go. You can't leave tomorrow. You can't go to California and you certainly can't go to this, this, Kazakhstan place. I won't allow it and that's final."

He spoke softly and slowly. "Sweetheart, you know it's part of my job. You know I *have* to go."

She shook her head. "I know nothing of the sort."

"I won't be gone long. It's just for a few days, a week at the longest."

"You can't go, Keegan. You can't go," she said, the tears spilling over her cheek.

His brow furrowed as he tried to understand what his wife was saying and more importantly, why she was saying it. "Lizzy, it's not like it's the first time I've been called away. I've had plenty of missions where I had to be gone for a while and you've never had a problem before. From the beginning you told me my job wouldn't bother you. Remember all those years ago when we first got together and you told me you understood what my job entailed and you would have no problem with it? You said you were used to being alone. You had been the wife of a soldier and you understood what that means? Remember you said it wouldn't bother you?"

"Yes, I remember, but it's bothering me now. You can't go, Keegan. Find someone else."

"Someone else? Come on, sweetheart, you're kidding right? The men who are coming on this mission, I trained them. I have to be there with them."

"Get Brayden or one of your other Afghanistan buddies to go."

"Brayden *is* going. So is Kaleb and Tristan. And Joey and Jeff and several other Elite."

"Then they won't miss you."

His brows shot up. He shook his head. "Well now, thanks for diminishing my importance."

She threw her hands up. "I'm sorry, but I'm desperate and I can't let you go."

"Lizzy, you know Jeffy Kino is in danger. You know if it was one of our children, all the others would come forward and do whatever it would take to help bring them home. I have to do whatever I can to help. I'm surprised that you don't want me to, because I know how much you love Jeffy."

Lizzy's face crumpled.

"Lizbet, come here," he said, holding his hand out to her.

She came slowly to him. He took her hand and led her to the living room, sank down into his favorite chair and pulled her into his lap. "Now, tell me sweetheart, what is this really all about? Why do you say I can't go?"

She sniffed, looked him in the eye and tried to put her fears into words. Drawing a deep breath, she began at the beginning. "Back, when I was married to Bradley, after Heather was born and Bradley went away to Iraq, remember I told you I found out I was pregnant with Rose and Violet?"

"Yes, of course I remember."

"Well, Bradley, he was away when they were born. He didn't even see them until they were several months old. Then, I got pregnant with Daisy and Lily, and Bradley was killed before I had them and once again I had to give birth without the man I love at my side."

"Oookaay," he said slowly.

"Then, you came into my life and I got pregnant with Gabriel, and you had to go rescue Lily while I was giving birth."

His brow furrowed and he nodded. "Yeah, that was a scary time."

"I don't want you to go away, Keegan. What if something happens to you?"

He shook his head. "I can't go on a mission with those thoughts in my

head. I'm not afraid. I don't want you to be afraid either."

"But I am afraid. Don't you see? I'm afraid because I'm—"

She stopped and he waited, but when she went no further he prompted her on. "What are you trying to tell me? What are you saying, Lizzy?"

She blinked up at him, nodding her head.

The light went on. "Are you telling me you're pregnant?"

She bit her lip. Nodded.

He couldn't contain his smile. "Elizabeth, you're gonna have a baby?" He frowned then. "But how?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "I don't know. I guess we weren't as careful as we thought."

"How far along? How are you feeling?"

"Eight weeks and I'm not feeling too bad."

They sat in silence for a minute.

"Lizzy, are you upset about being pregnant? Is that what this is all about?" he finally asked.

"Are you kidding me? Of course not. Besides, what's the alternative? End the pregnancy? I would never do that. It's not something I would even consider, ending a baby's life. How can anybody ever think that killing a child is the answer to anything?"

"Exactly," he agreed, wary of which way to take the conversation.

Lizzy went on. "I'm only thirty-nine. I'd love to have another child. What I don't want, Keegan, is to have this child alone. I want you by my side. I need you by my side."

He was beginning to understand and knew he needed to tread softly. "Sweetheart, I'll be back in about a week. That's not so long."

She sniffed as the tears came again. "What if you aren't? What if you don't make it back?"

"I can't go away with those thoughts in my head, Elizabeth," he said firmly.

"I know that, but I'm afraid, Keegan. Bradley said he'd be back too. I have really bad luck when it comes to having babies. I'm afraid you won't come back."

"Oh, hon," he said, holding her close and stroking her back. "I promise to be careful. I promise to not take any chances. Surely you understand that I couldn't live with myself if I didn't go and something happened to Tristan or Joey or anyone else because I wasn't there. Tell me you understand."

"I do understand, in my head. I do. My heart though, is screaming for you to stay here with me, here, safe and sound where you belong." She wiped her tears and sighed. "Okay, look, I know you have to go, Keegan.

I know I shouldn't have even asked you to stay. I shouldn't put any more pressure on you than you already have. I know you need to focus on the job at hand and not be distracted. So, go Keegan. Fight hard and strong and come back to me."

He held her tight. "I will, I promise."

They sat nestled together for several minutes.

"Keegan? I have a request to make."

"What's that?"

"Let me come to California with you. It's spring break. Gabe and the girls can come along. We can visit with the Kinos and I'll try to help in any way I can."

Keegan thought a minute. "Ya know, Shelley Kino could probably use a distraction," he thought out loud. "Tell ya what, I'll give Jason a call and arrange it, but I have to leave in the morning. Can you be ready by then?"

She jumped up. "Yes. It won't take me long to pack." She frowned. "Oh, I almost forgot. Maddie insists everyone come to dinner tonight at the Inn. She says she has an announcement to make."

"Well, we can go but we'll have to make an early night of it if you and three kids are gonna be ready to go in the morning. I'll call the airlines and see if I can still get you on my flight." He smiled. "First though, is there any reason you want to keep this pregnancy a secret?"

"No, why?"

"Let's tell the girls."

She smiled, nodded.

"Girls!" he called loudly. "Lily! Daisy! Come downstairs."

Lizzy moved off her husband's lap and sat on the sofa. It took only a few moments for the girls to dash down the stairs.

"Everything okay down here?" Lily asked, eyeing her mother who'd obviously been crying.

Keegan smiled. "Everything is great, but I'm gonna need your cooperation. Listen, girls, you know I have to go out of town for a little while. Your mom is worried and upset about it and— "

"Why? You go off on your secret missions all the time. Why is she worried? Where are you going?" Lily asked quickly, the worry evident in her eyes.

"I have to fly to California and from there to Kazakhstan. It's a bigger operation than usual. To ease your mom's worries, she's decided she would like to come as far as California to visit the Kinos. She would like for you two and Gabriel to come along with her and I would like that too because I'm gonna need you to take good care of her while I'm gone."

"Take care of her? What's wrong? Why does Mom need taking care of?" Daisy asked.

He smiled at Lizzy. Lizzy turned to the girls. "He's worried about me because I just found out that we're gonna have a baby."

Squeals of delight filled the air as the two girls hugged each other and their parents. When all the commotion died down, Keegan took a few minutes to fill them in on the rest of the story, where and why he was going, and why their mom was so fearful. He secured their cooperation and went on with plans.

"So," Keegan said as he stood, "first things first. I'll make the plane reservations and I'll call Jason. You three get ready to go eat at Maddie's and pack what you can now. After dinner you can finish packing and make any other arrangements you'll need to make."

"We're on it," the girls said in unison as they ran back up the steps.

Lizzy turned to follow them but was stopped when Keegan grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to him. "Hey," he said softly.

She smiled up at him.

"Everything is gonna be okay," he said.

She nodded, offering him a smile. "Thank you, Keegan."

"Thank you, Lizzy, for all the love you so freely give." He cupped her face and kissed her tenderly. "And, for wanting to have my baby." He kissed her once more then shoved her up the steps.



As forks clicked against plates and ice tinkled in glasses, Maddie Lewis looked around the giant table at the people she loved. Her granddaughter, Lisa and the man she married, Chaz Stewart, and their four children, Laynah, Charlie, Matthew and little Aralyn. Then there was Lisa's business partner, Jodi Appel, Jodi's husband, John, and their son, Jacob, who just turned eighteen at the end of February. Maddie loved the Appels like her own family since they actually lived right here in the Inn with her.

And then there was Lizzy and Keegan Tanner and three of their six children. They had the one boy, Gabriel, and five girls from Lizzy's first husband. Keegan loved those girls like his own, but never adopted them. They, the girls, and Lizzy and Keegan, had made the decision to keep their real father's name in order to honor him. Bradley Anderson had died in Iraq.

Cowboys, innkeepers, singers, martial artists, special agents, athletes, such a diverse group of people and all so very talented in their own way. And beautiful. So much beauty. She smiled at each one, catching their eye and moving on.

"So, Grams," Lisa said. "Tell us, what's the big news you wanted to share? We're sitting on pins and needles."

"Well, dear, it's not really news. Rather, it's an announcement. I've decided to do something and I would like to be backed up in this project by everyone here, and especially by you."

"Anything you want, Grams, you know I'll help you," Lisa said.

Grams frowned. "Well, Lisa, maybe not, when you hear what it is I want to do."

Lisa smiled. "Really? Wow, must be awful. Are you running away to be married to that handsome Mr. Goodman that came to the Inn this past Christmas?"

Maddie laughed. "Oh dear me, no! I could never love another man since your grandfather."

Chaz, Keegan and John all smiled. The woman was so sweet and so cute. They were all a little in love with her.

"Well, he sure liked you," Jodi put in.

"Nonsense. He was simply being polite."

"Oh, polite. Is that what they call it?" Lisa laughed.

"Now really, Lisa. This is very serious, and I'm afraid to admit that I called everyone here to help me because I was a little bit afraid of your reaction."

The table grew quiet as they realized Maddie wasn't joking around. Something was troubling her.

She put her fork down. "You all have children, look at them. Are they precious to you?" She smiled as the adults at the table all nodded their heads and a few mumbled words like, "absolutely, they are everything," and so on.

"Mr. Lewis and I, it took us a very long time to conceive a child. When we finally did we were ecstatic. The day we found out we were gonna have a baby, he started building. He built a rocker, a crib, a highchair, mobiles and toys. I painted the little room down the hall pink and blue, because back then, you didn't know what you were gonna have until you had it. I made curtains for the room and bought all kinds of stuffed animals and blocks and even a tiny tea set. And then—little Louise came into the world."

She stopped to glance up at Lisa, who had gone quite still.

"It was an old-fashioned name, I know. We named her for my sweet baby sister who'd died when she was only five. I was thirteen and to console my mother, I'd told her that I would name my first baby after Louise."

Maddie's eyes took on a dreamy look. "Louise was so tiny. She had my blonde hair and her father's eyes. Once her hair finally started growing, I couldn't buy enough pink ribbons. I loved her more than I thought I could love anything. I guess I spoiled her. I know her father did. We only wanted the best for her. Once Louise got closer to her teenage years, she changed from being my sweet, if petulant, little baby girl, to a horror. I can't tell you how many tears I cried over that girl."

Chaz eyed his wife, knowing she'd been hurt terribly by her mother, Louise Lewis.

"As most of you know, Louise got pregnant with Lisa when she was sixteen and she left home. I knew true misery then. I don't think Mr. Lewis ever got over it. I think he thought she would come back through that door any day, saying she realized how much she loved us. But she never did. I don't know where we went wrong. We—"

"You didn't do anything wrong, Grams," Lisa said sharply. "She was just a bad apple. She was selfish and greedy. She went down the dark side and liked it too much. I'm sorry if my words hurt you, but I don't want you berating yourself over Lou."

Maddie smiled sweetly at her. "Lisa, I appreciate you wanting to protect me. I'm telling you all this little story to help you understand what I'm about to say. I want to go to California to see my daughter."

Lisa gasped.

"I want to find some closure there. I'm not getting any younger. For the longest time, I didn't know where Louise was, what she was doing. Then Lisa left her and came to find me and I did know. I kept hoping that one day, Louise would follow. I've realized though that it's not gonna happen and I don't want to go to my grave asking myself why I never made the effort to go to her."

"Grams, are you ill?" Lisa asked quickly.

"Nonsense. I'm as healthy as a horse. Still, people don't live forever. Now," she said crisply. "Since the Inn is closed for the month of March, and since spring break is coming up, I thought it would be nice to spend this coming week in California. Now I know it's late notice, but I'm positive I can make this happen."

"I don't—" Lisa started.

"I think that would be great," Jodi quickly interrupted. "I could come with you! I can see some of my old friends, and besides the Kinos, John has like a million friends out there."

John laughed. "Not that many, but I can dig a trip to California. What about you son?"

"Don't see a problem," Jacob answered. "Even though Becky is not gonna be happy. She'll just have to understand," he said in an effort to live up to his new eighteen-year-old mature status. He and his girlfriend were having problems anyway. It would be good to be away from her for a while.

Laynah Stewart rolled her eyes and wrinkled her adorable nose at Jacob's comment.

"Lisa?" Chaz said, rubbing his hand over her shoulder. "This is a hard thing for you, I know. A hard thing for both you and Maddie. What do you say?"

Lisa looked from face to face, sighed. "How could I deny Maddie anything she asks of me? She's been so good to me and she was good to my mother. I won't be the cause of any more pain for her, but I have to say, Grams, I think this is gonna cause you some tears."

"Tears? What's a little saltwater between family?"

The group laughed.

"How about you, Melaynah?" Lisa asked her seventeen-year-old daughter.

"Oh, I think this is gonna be awesome," she answered, glancing quickly at Jacob.

Chaz caught the fleeting look and eyed Jake, his brow creasing. "I'm all in," he said pointedly. "I'm sure Tyson and Dad can handle things at the ranch until we get back."

Keegan and Lizzy smiled at each other.

"What about you, Keeg? Wanna come?" John asked.

"Yeah, Dad," Gabriel piped up. "Are we going?"

"Well now, this is actually quite a coincidence. I was gonna ask tonight John, if you and Jodi could see fit to join Lizzy in California."

"What?" Lizzy asked.

He smiled at her. "I wasn't gonna tell you until I had an answer from them." He turned to the rest of the group to explain. "Lizzy and I had already decided to take a trip to California. You guys know all about the problem with Jeffy Kino's life being threatened. Well, Jason has located the operation that's trying to kill her and he wants it taken out. I have to fly to California in the morning and then I leave from there for Kazakhstan."

"Kazakhstan?" John muttered. "Geez, Keeg, how big of an operation are we talking?"

Keegan glanced quickly at Lizzy. "We can discuss all the details later. The deal is, I have to leave in the morning and Lizzy has been feeling a little clingy lately, and so, she and the kids are coming with me as far as California. They're gonna stay with the Kinos while I'm gone. I was hoping

to get you guys to come along to keep an eye on her so that I could concentrate on my job."

"Why are you feeling clingy, Lizzy?" Jodi asked sympathetically.

Lizzy took a deep breath, smiled up at Keegan.

"Cuz she's gonna have a baby," Lily and Daisy said at once.

"Oh my goodness!" Maddie cried. "How wonderful!"

"How do you feel about this?" Lisa asked.

"Oh, I'm happy about having the baby, but—" she trailed off as she fought the tears that welled in her eyes.

Jodi reached for her hand, squeezed it. "Oh, sweetie. I get it. You're pregnant and Keegan is going back out into the field—a very dangerous field."

Lizzy nodded. "I'm so afraid it's gonna happen again."

Keegan glanced at Gabriel, whose face was solemn and contemplative.

"Dad?" Gabe said softly. "How bad is it?"

"It's not as bad as they make it sound. It's nothing like what John and I have faced before."

John eyed Keegan, but kept his mouth shut.

"Look, everyone," Keegan said adamantly. "My job is sometimes dangerous. You all know that. I promise to be careful, but you all also know that sometimes a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. I can't stay home and send another in my place. I have the most experience."

"Along with me," John added.

"Right, but last time I checked you weren't working for Ameritech. Still, I was depending on you to keep an eye on my family while I'm gone."

"You got that, Keeg," John swore.

Keegan nodded. "Okay, then. So, it looks like the whole Pine Forest clan is heading to California. When will the rest of you be shipping out?"

"It will take me a few days to get things arranged," Lisa said.

Maddie nodded. "A few days would be perfect."

"Well, John, Jake and I can be ready to fly out sometime tomorrow," Jodi offered.

"I just spoke with Jason. The Kino family is all staying together at the main house which means they're occupying six of the twelve bedrooms," Keegan said.

"The girls and I can share a room," Lizzy offered.

"Good, I was gonna suggest that. And Gabriel, you can stay in the same room with JoJo, Logan and Eric if you'd like or you and Jacob can share a room."

"Gabe and I can camp out together with the other guys," Jake said.

"That would be great. With John and Jodi in another room, that means there are still four rooms left for anyone else who decides to stay at the Kinos," Keegan said.

"I think our family and Grams will get a hotel room, if you don't mind," Lisa added.

"Don't mind at all," Keegan replied. "I know you have your own family drama you'll need to work out."

Chaz nodded. "Sounds like a great time," he joked.

"We'll all be together with people we love and care about. That's what counts," John added.

"But you will come and visit with the Kinos, won't you?" Lizzy asked Lisa.

"Of course. We'll come over and show our support."

"Well, I suggest we call it a night as we all have preparations to make," Keegan urged.

"Oh, no," Maddie cried. "You can't go without dessert!"

"Well, of course not," Keegan replied. "Don't know what in the world I was thinking."

❁

Jay Sanders couldn't keep the tears from coming. "I, I can't stand it any longer. Please. Just let me out."

"I would be happy to."

The eerily calm, disembodied voice seemed to come to Jay from everywhere at once.

"All you have to do, Jay," Jason continued, "is tell me what I want to know."

Silence.

"Jay, do you know how long you've been in there?"

"No. Forever. Maybe, ten, fifteen hours. I don't know. I gotta get out of here."

"It's been only four hours, Jay. That's all. Just four hours. I know it seems like a lot longer. It's called sensory deprivation, Jay."

"I can't stand the darkness. I'm going crazy."

"All you have to do is talk to me, Jay."

Jay walked the perimeter of the room, his hand running along the circular wall, the never-ending, circular wall. He couldn't see anything. Not even his own hand in front of his face. It bothered him that as he circled the room, he never came to a door. It bothered him the way the darkness seemed to press in against him from all sides, like it was something tangible that could grab him and hold him until he simply ceased to exist.

"If you feel like this after four hours, Jay, think how you'll feel after four days, or four weeks. I'm a patient man, Jay."

Jay's body began to tremble at the thought. Even four more hours made him cringe. Four weeks? "Let me out," Jay screamed, pounding his fists against the wall.

Jason waited for him to calm down. "You're over-stressed. Go back to the bed, Jay. Lie down and put on the headphones."

"There's not a bed in here. I've walked all over this room."

"Are you sure?"

Jay drew several breaths. "Where is the bed? I can't see it."

"Turn slightly to your left. Stop. That's it. Walk forward eight steps. Good. Reach out."

Jay touched the edge of the bed, collapsed on it and buried his face in the pillow.

"The headphones are on the rail to your right. That's right. Go ahead and put them on. You will hear some pleasant sounds. The ocean. Rain. Chimes. It will help you forget where you are."

"But—"

"Good night, Jay. Or, is it day?"

Jason turned off the speaker and turned to Joey and Jeff. "He won't last much longer."

"I have to say, that your means of torture is much nicer and much neater than what I went through at the hands of terrorists, way back when," Jeff stated.

Jason grinned. "Ya think? Jay Sanders is not exactly a brilliant specimen, so it's working much faster than it would for someone like you. The lack of sound and lack of light is maddening for someone who's never turned inward. And now, the pleasant tones on the headphones combined with the brainsync technology and the subliminal messages, he'll be talking in a few hours."

"Why do you even need to hear what he has to say?" Joey asked. "The cocktail you shot into Ormandi was good enough to have him cough up all the details."

"Yes, and we're assembling the team, but why not get as much info as possible?"

Joey nodded. He and Keegan Tanner would be leading a team into the stronghold of Russian billionaire, Echlon Loksalle. The rogue military operation, located on the southern tip of Mangystau Province in Kazakhstan and overlooked by the Kazakhstani government, consisted mainly of mercenaries and criminals. Of course, Jason realized that if they don't cut

off the head of the snake it will strike again. So they had plans to take care of Mr. Loksalle too. Those plans included a few high-tech surveillance gadgets, and a couple of Ameritech's best hackers which included his daughter's boyfriend, Jensen Deal.

"The team will be complete by this afternoon when Keegan arrives," Joey said.

Jason nodded. "As you know, we'll be coordinating with a SEAL team. Preliminary briefing will be in the morning."

"I'll look forward to it," Joey said.

Jason eyed the two men. Joseph Adams and Jefferson Davis. Joey and Jeff. Two of the best. Joey was slated to take over Ameritech and Jeff's sharpshooting skills were unsurpassed, yet neither had been in the military. They'd been on some fairly large raids but this was by far the largest operation they'd ever attempted.

When Jeff was only twenty-five, he'd been in on the raid of a child trafficking ring and had been captured and tortured by Islamic terrorists. It was Keegan Tanner who'd saved him. Special Agent Keegan Tanner at the time. Since then, Jeff had grown in skill and mostly in experience and maturity.

Both he and Joey were confident, but not cocky, and they took the job deadly serious. Joey's baby sister was out there somewhere waiting for him to succeed so she could come home. Still, Jason was just as concerned about his men as he was about Jeffy. He blew out a breath. "Go home you two, make love to your wives and kiss your kids."

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Breanna Adams Kino lay snuggled against her husband's chest. Suddenly, he flipped her over and kissed her hard. "I will never be able to get enough of you," he growled. "Never. Lord knows it's not from lack of trying."

Bree sighed. "Keep trying, honey. I have no complaints."

"I love you, Bree."

She smiled. "I know. I love you too, Rick. Everything about you."

He bent and kissed her softly. She gave a soft moan and then a ladylike curse when her cell phone rang. It took a second for Ricky to let her up, but he finally did, though begrudgingly.

She glanced at the phone before she answered. "Hi Caroline!" Bree said, then mouthed to Ricky, Caroline Smith.

"Hi Bree, how are you?"

"I'm okay."

"Toby told me Jeffy is okay and will be coming home in about a week."

"Yeah, that's what they tell me. It can't be too soon for me."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sure you're fit to be tied."

Bree smiled. "It's nice to hear a good ole' southern saying. Reminds me of my teenage years."

"Well, shut my mouth, if it cheers you up, I can really pour it on. I do declare I can get your feathers ruffled and then you'll be sittin' in tall cotton."

Bree laughed. "I wish Ricky had been listening. You sound so cute when you say that stuff."

"Where is he?"

"He's lying right beside me."

"Oh. Oh! Oh, no, did I interrupt you two?"

"Don't worry about it," Bree said with a laugh. "We have company coming, so we thought we'd get in some alone time now, cuz who knows how things will go later."

"Well, then, I'll let you go."

"No, that's okay. Really. We're uh, finished for the time being," she said, winking at Ricky. "Besides, I hardly ever get to talk to you."

"Okay, then, so, who's coming to visit? Anyone I know?"

"Yes, it is, as a matter of fact. It's Keegan and Lizzy and three of their kids."

"Really? That's strange. She didn't say a thing to me the other day when we talked."

"It was last minute. So, I heard the recent single she made with Keith Urban went straight to number one."

"Yeah, it did. She's awesome. Her voice is like an angel."

"It really is and it was so nice for Toby to give her the opportunities he has. I mean, when Mr. Country Music shows up at your wedding and offers to make a record for you, how cool is that? Too bad she doesn't devote more time to it."

"Yeah, her pick of projects are few and far between, but I understand her wanting to stay home with the kids as much as possible. As a matter of fact, I've recently taken some time off to spend more time with my kids and I'm thinking I won't be going back to work any time soon."

"I hear ya. So, tell me, why did you call in the first place? I know it wasn't just to woo me with southern idioms."

"Well, actually, I called to see if you were thinking about attending the big bash next weekend there in Hollywood."

"The big bash? Guess I missed that one."

"It's supposed to be a celebration of the arts. Actors, musicians,

dancers, playwrights, poets, photographers, painters, writers. Only those who've won prestige through awards or other forms of recognition are invited. That includes Tony winners, Oscar winners and Grammy winners, which means Toby and—you, Bree."

"You know, I think I remember my publicist talking to me about this a few weeks ago. I didn't pay much attention because of what's going on around here with Jeffy. And I don't think I'm interested in a party that celebrates the winning of awards. It's like patting ourselves on the back a second time and that sounds silly to me."

"Yeah, to me too, but Toby's manager is insisting he needs to be there if he wants to get the funding for the children's music programs he wants to sponsor in the schools. The place is gonna be crawling with philanthropists. Even the big guy who's throwing the bash is entertaining offers of humanitarian efforts in the arts."

"Who is he?"

"He's some Russian dude, a multi-billionaire named Echlon Loksalle."

"Echlon Loksalle? Never heard of him."

Ricky rolled over suddenly. "Put it on speaker."

"Caroline, Ricky wants me to put you on speaker. Suddenly he's interested."

"Okay."

"Tell me what you know about this guy," Ricky said.

"Not much at all. He's a billionaire. Made most of his money in pharmaceuticals."

"Yeah, there's a surprise."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Go on."

"He's sponsoring this big bash that Toby and Bree have been invited to." Caroline went on to tell him everything she'd just told Bree.

"Will he be there?" Ricky asked.

"Yes, well, I mean, that is what's implied."

"When is this happening?"

"Next Saturday, why?"

"Let me speak to Toby."

"Ricky, you're being rude," Bree complained.

"Oh, sorry, ladies." He blew out a breath, went on to explain. "This guy you mentioned, this Echlon Loksalle, he's the guy funding the attacks on Jeffy."

"Oh, my goodness," Caroline said. "Then we most certainly will not be going."

"No, I want you to go. I want us to go. I need to talk to Toby and Jason. I think I have an idea."

"They're here, they're here!" Taylor hollered from somewhere downstairs.

Ricky frowned. "Listen, Caro, tell Toby I'll call him in an hour or so. Keegan and Lizzy just got here."

"Oh, great. Keep us in suspense," she joked. "Yes, I'll tell him. Bye you guys. Give Lizzy a big hug for us."

"Will do," Bree said as she rose, quickly gathered her clothes and ran into the bathroom.

Ricky pulled on the jeans and t-shirt he'd tossed on the floor earlier. "I'll meet you downstairs, mon amour," he called.

"Ricky, don't you dare say anything smart about why I'm not dressed," she warned.

"Would I do that?" Ricky said with a chuckle as he closed the bedroom door.

From the top of the stairs, Ricky watched Taylor throw open the front door and go running out.

Shelley and Eric came from the kitchen. JoJo, Logan and young Eric came up from the lower level, ran past their grandparents and out the door. Bella and Breez also came from the kitchen area, each holding a fat baby girl in their arms. Sophia stood between them. Ricky skipped down the steps and looked outside.

Keegan was helping Lizzy out of the Ameritech limo van that had picked them up at the airport. Taylor was standing beside the van talking a mile a minute to Lily and Daisy. It was so reminiscent of Jeffy when she was that age that Ricky's heart lurched in his chest. Gabriel was busy trying to help the driver get the bags out of the van and smiled when JoJo, Logan and young Eric each greeted him by patting him on the shoulder and shaking his hand. The boys grabbed up the bags and headed inside.

Keegan and Lizzy came up the large expanse of front steps and were greeted by Eric and Shelley.

"It's so good to see you again," Shelley said as she kissed each of them on their cheeks.

Eric extended his hand and a kind smile to Lizzy. "Hello, Liz." He pressed her hand between both of his and looked into her eyes. "Thank you for coming," he said.

Blinking up at his face, she knew exactly what he was conveying. He was thanking her for allowing Keegan to help with the operation that would return his daughter to him.

She nodded, offered a smile. "It's nice to see you, Eric."

"Grandmaster Kino," Keegan said. "Eric, good to see you and thank you for your hospitality."

Eric smiled. "I believe the thanks goes to you and your family."

Keegan nodded. "You're welcome, but I'm just doing my job."

Eric glanced past Keegan and his face lit up. "My angels," he said.

Both Lily and Daisy giggled. They and their older sisters had met this man when they'd been just toddlers and it had been love at first sight. "Hello, Grandmaster Kino," they said in unison.

He held out his arms and they both went into them for a giant hug. They stepped back.

"I didn't think it was possible that you could be more beautiful than the last time I saw you."

"Beautiful ain't the word," JoJo muttered under his breath.

"Hot is more like it," young Eric conceded.

Logan just smiled.

Eric smiled at Gabriel. "Young sir," he said solemnly.

Smiling, Gabriel bowed. Since Gabriel had been four years old he'd insisted that everyone should always bow to Grandmaster Kino because that showed the respect he deserved as Grandmaster. Everyone agreed, but Gabe was the only one who never forgot.

Eric bowed to the young man before he reached forward and shook the boy's hand. "You're growing like a weed," Eric said to him.

Gabe smiled. "Yes, sir."

Shelley kissed Gabriel's cheek.

"I thought the Appels were coming with you," Eric said to Keegan.

"They had to take a later flight but they should be here in a couple of hours," Keegan answered.

Shelley grabbed Lizzy's arm and led her inside. "Come on, I'll help you get settled."

"Not so fast," Ricky said as he trotted down the stairs to the door.

He reached out to give Keegan a hearty handshake. "Keeg, so good to see you, man." They leaned forward and hugged briefly.

Ricky then grabbed Lizzy and kissed both her cheeks.

"Where's Bree?" Lizzy asked as she tucked a lock of her blond hair behind her ear.

Ricky offered a sly grin. "I, uh, had to show her something, and I did, and she's now in the bathroom putting her clothes back on."

"Geez, Uncle Rick," JoJo complained.

"Ricky Kino, I knew you were gonna do that. I'm gonna get you back,"

Bree said from the top of the stairs.

He grinned. "I'll look forward to it."

Lizzy smiled while Keegan and Shelley chuckled.

Bree came down the steps and greeted everyone with hugs and kisses.

Daisy and Lily still had a hard time treating one of their favorite movie stars like a regular person, but they tried very hard to be nonchalant. Their brother Gabriel had always had the same problem with Ricky.

"Mom, Lily and Daisy said they would stay with me in Jeffy's room," Taylor said as they all came inside.

"Yeah, and Gabe is gonna stay with us, aren't you, Gabe?" young Eric said.

"Sure," Gabriel answered, smiling at the way the older boys had always so easily accepted him.

"Well, looks like that's all settled." Shelley said, turning to Breez and Bella who stood in the foyer.

The Tanners hadn't seen Breez and Bella since the babies had been born and it took another ten minutes for everyone to greet Mark and Joey's wives, get Sophia to speak to them and nuzzle the babies' cheeks a few times.

Keegan watched his wife as she doted on each little baby girl, holding them against her breast and kissing their smooth cheeks. When she handed the babies back to their respective mothers, she had tears in her eyes.

He took her by the elbow. "Come on, sweetheart, let's get you settled. I think you need some rest."

Wiping her eyes, Lizzy agreed and the Tanner family followed Shelley upstairs.

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During the short break, Jason glanced around the briefing room, eyeing each man. They were a good group, a tough group, and he had complete confidence that they would be able to pull off this very delicate mission, delicate because of the political implications should things go wrong. Obviously, the intel was key here. As long as their information was correct, rounding up the large group of deadly mercenaries who worked for Loksalle should be a piece of cake; however, Jason had never been naive enough to believe that anything was a piece of cake.

Joey and Keegan were going in as joint heads. This mission was being played as a military op and Joey did not have military experience. Yet Keegan, having been a member of a special ops team in Afghanistan, had vast experience, along with his buddies, Tristan, Brayden and Kaleb, who now worked with Ameritech. Those five, along with sharpshooter Jeff

Davis and fourteen more of Jason's Elite, would be working in tandem with a group of SEALs who, when the mission was over, would claim that it never happened.

Loksalle's facilities would be destroyed, his weapon stash confiscated, his men dealt with, but Jason knew they would not go down without a fight. Not because they had any loyalty to Loksalle, but because either they wouldn't want their payday to come to an end, or they got off on violence.

Jason glanced over to the side of the room where his brother, Justin Lee sat alongside Grandmaster Eric Kino, Ricky Kino, Mark Adams and John Appel. Ricky and Mark, though not working for Ameritech, had been paid consulting fees to help train Jason's Elite. They, along with Grandmaster Kino, had been invited to this last briefing for two reasons. One, as a show of respect and two, because it was their daughter/sister who was the pawn at the bottom of this whole thing. Brother Justin was present not only because he was part of the family, but because he was Ameritech's attorney. His firm had a team of attorneys working on the legalities of this particular operation. John Appel had been invited because he was an old friend who'd accompanied the Tanners from Georgia and had synchronistically been part of Keegan's Afghanistan team.

Jason turned, cleared his throat and the group of men immediately became silent. "Now, once you've secured Loksalle's facilities, you will move on to rendezvous with Cam and Jeffy and serve as an escort back to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. Agent Sweet will be in touch to give us their route." He turned the meeting over to the Navy Commander who would be working with them.

The man was precise and succinct in his words. Jason watched Joey's face to make sure he understood all that was going down. When the Commander finished, Jason glanced at his watch, rose. "You have your assignment. Now go home. You have until 0400 hours to take care of any personal business. I will see you at the base." He turned to the side. "Grandmaster Kino? Any words from you?"

Eric stood, faced the men who would be key in returning his daughter to safety. "Gratitude is such a simple word for what you are about to do. Your bravery and sacrifice is duly noted. Once my daughter is allowed to come into her full potential, there will be much less suffering in the world. And the world will have you to thank for helping that to happen." He stood silently a moment. "I pray God will keep you all safe and bring you victory, in Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," the men answered.

Eric then slowly and reverently bowed to them.

The men scrambled to their feet and returned the honor.

"God go with you'," Eric said softly.



Lizzy glanced at her watch—9 PM. The men would be home soon and then she and Keegan would have only a few hours together before he had to leave. Her hands shook and she clasped them tightly together to hold them still.

"And I would love to get some shopping done," Bree said as she stretched her toes out in front of her.

"Me too," Jodi Appel agreed. "What about you, Lizzy? Feel like diving into a couple new pairs of shoes?"

When Lizzy didn't answer, the whole group of women turned toward her. Shelley, Angel, Lori, Bree, Breez, Bella, Mickey and Jodi.

"Lizzy?" Shelley said softly.

Lizzy blinked, focused in on the soft voice. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"Are you worried about Keegan?" Mickey asked.

Lizzy bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

"I don't blame you, because I'm worried about Joey," Breez said.

"And I'm worried about Jeff," Mickey admitted. "But I've been trying to have positive thoughts."

Shelley reached out across the kitchen table where they'd been eating ice cream and talking a mile a minute for the past hour. She patted Lizzy's hand. "You lost one husband over there, and now you're afraid you'll lose another. Is that it?" she asked gently.

Lizzy nodded slowly as she lost the battle and the tears fell over her cheek.

"Oh, sweetie, we understand," Bella said quickly, taking her other hand and squeezing it.

Lizzy sniffed, pulled her hands free so she could use them to wipe at the tears.

"Here," Justin's wife Lori said, offering her a napkin.

Shelley watched Lizzy as she dabbed at her eyes.

"There's more, isn't there?" Shelley asked. "What else is going on? You can tell us anything."

Lizzy shrugged.

"You might as well tell them," Jodi said.

Lizzy looked around the table. She sighed.

"You're pregnant," Breez blurted out.

The statement brought on a fresh wave of tears. Through them, Lizzy

nodded. The women all squealed with delight.

"Seven children, Lizzy, oh, my, goodness," Bree said.

Lizzy laughed as she dabbed at her eyes. "I know, it's crazy, isn't it? I don't even know how it happened."

"You and I gotta have a long talk," Bree answered dryly, causing all the women to laugh.

"How did you guess so easily?" Lizzy asked Breez.

"Well, it didn't take a genius to figure that one out. Still," she said looking around the table at everyone with a big smile. "I guess it takes one to know one."

It took a moment before the information made its way home and the entire place erupted again.

"Shame on you for not telling me," Bella chided her younger sister.

"I just took a pregnancy test today. I thought I would tell Joey before I told anyone else, but I wanted to wait until he got back so he wouldn't be distracted. So you have to promise not to tell him."

"We wouldn't dare," Bree promised.

Breez took Lizzy's hand and squeezed it between her own. "So, Liz, I guess I'm beginning to understand what you went through before and what you're going through now. Somehow, though, we have to trust and let go of our fears."

"I'm so trying," Lizzy said.

"In just a few days the men will be home," Shelley said. "Focus on that. And I'll focus on the fact that my daughter will be with them, home, safe and sound after sixteen months away."

"Let's do a prayer circle," Jodi offered. "Everyone join hands."

The women pulled their chairs closer and took each other's hands.

Breathing deeply, Jodi began. "Father we come to you in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ—"

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Logan backed away from the kitchen entrance and headed back out through the large glass dining room doors past the pool to the lower deck.

"Uh, I thought you were gonna get that bag of chips," JoJo said as Logan rejoined the group.

"Yeah, and where's the cookies for the girls?" young Eric asked.

"Sorry guys," Logan said. "I got up there and the women were all crying and stuff and I couldn't figure out a way to get past them cuz they're all at the kitchen table. Then, just when I thought I could interrupt, Ms. Jodi started praying and I didn't want to mess it up."

"Who was crying?" Daisy asked.

Logan shrugged. "Well, they were all a little weepy and stuff, but mostly it was your mom."

Lily and Daisy looked at each other.

"Maybe we'd better go in and check on her," Lily said.

"If your mom is upset and all the women are praying it would be best to let it be," young Eric advised.

"I agree with Eric," Jake Appel said.

"Mom's been crying a lot cuz she's gonna have another baby," Gabe offered.

"Yeah, and uh, that's one of the things they were all talking about, and uh, one more thing," Logan said.

"What?" JoJo asked.

"Aunt Breez is pregnant too."

Eric and JoJo looked at each other with a smile. "Really?"

"Yeah, that's what I heard. She said she didn't want to tell Uncle Joey yet cuz he has to concentrate on his mission."

The older boys all nodded.

"Wow, Aunt Breez is gonna have another baby? That is so cool," Taylor said. She eyed Logan. "Don't you think so?"

"Sure. It's cool."

"Well, all the men are gonna be back soon," young Eric said. "Once that happens, our little party is gonna be over. The men will have to get some sleep."

"We could get together again tomorrow night," Jake suggested. "The Stewarts are coming into town too, and we can get Laynah to come over and join us."

JoJo's head popped up. "Laynah's in town?"

"She will be tomorrow. Her mom and great grandmother are gonna have a reunion with her grandmother."

"Oh, so, she'll be out with them?"

"Uh, uh. Only the adults. The kids are staying here."

JoJo smiled. "Well that's cool. So, let's plan a little pizza party for tomorrow night."

"Sounds good," Jake agreed.

"So, uh, Lily," Eric began with a smile, "you wanna go for a walk on the beach?"

Lily smiled at the handsome seventeen-year-old. "Are you puttin' the moves on me, Eric Kino?"

He grinned at her. "Not yet."

"I'm almost two years older than you," she reminded him.

He shrugged. "I like older women."

"Geez," Jake muttered while JoJo and Daisy laughed.

Lily moved closer to Eric, placed her hand lightly on his shoulder. She had to admit, the guy was totally hot. He looked a lot like his movie-star father. It wasn't so much his younger age as the fact that she thought of him like a brother. She leaned close, put her lips against his ear. "Why are you interested in older women? Is it that you would like me to relieve you of your virginity?" she whispered.

Eric's heart almost jumped through his chest. His mouth dropped open. And then, he looked into her eyes and saw that she was teasing him. Thinking fast, he drew up straight and tall. "*I* was thinking I could take care of that for *you*."

She laughed.

"Um, you guys know we can hear you, right?" Jacob said. "And no offense, but let me just say that if either of you followed through it wouldn't end well."

"How you figure?" Eric asked.

"Cuz I'd have to step in and kill you to defend Lily's honor and her father would probably kill her."

Logan and JoJo snorted at the idea of Jake defeating Eric in a battle, but Eric wasn't so quick to judge. He'd learned that the hard way after having had his head bashed in when he was eleven-years old. Jacob Appel was trained by his own father, who'd been trained by young Eric's grandfather. Jacob's father had also been special ops and had his own line of martial arts schools. Young Eric knew that Jake was not to be taken lightly. Still, this whole thing was simply a joke and not a reason to square off on anyone, so he conceded.

"You're right, Jake. It wouldn't end well, regardless of who won between the two of us. Still, Lily and Daisy are so hot, you can't blame a guy for at least trying."

Jacob smiled at Eric's wisdom. "You're right about that."

"Well, now that you guys have spilled out some of your overflowing testosterone, let me just set you straight on this," Lily said sharply. "First, Jacob Appel, I don't need you to defend my honor. I'll give, or have given—which one will remain undisclosed– away my virginity when I feel it's right to do so and no one else has a say in it."

Daisy chuckled at the astonished looks on the boy's faces. She didn't dare let on that because their mother had gotten pregnant so young, they'd had the abstain thing drilled into them and would never do what the entire stupid conversation was about anyway. Nor did she remind them that they,

like the Kinos, were stalwart Christians and had every intention to wait until they were married.

"And second, my father is not the one who would go a little crazy. That would be either my mother—"

"Or Rose," the twins said together as they burst into laughter.

Everyone chuckled at that, because Rose was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

"Well, I'm sorry, Lily, but I have to correct you," Jake said quickly. "Your mom or Rose may be the most vocal, but thinking like a guy, I can say, your father, and maybe even your brother, would be the hardest to come down on you."

Gabe nodded, because Jake spoke what he'd been thinking. Everyone turned to look at him. He smiled and nodded.

"Go on, Gabe," JoJo said. "Tell us, would you step in to defend Lily's honor or what would you do?"

Gabe shrugged. "Well, I'm a lot younger than her."

"We get that. Still, as a guy, what would you do?"

"Well, I mean, if Dad wasn't around, and I knew that Lily and young Eric had chosen to like, do what you guys are talkin' about, I guess I'd go to Lily and get her side of things. She'd probably feel pretty bad and I'd tell her that God forgives and maybe see if she'd like me to pray with her."

The group was silent for a moment, because Gabe's response was heartfelt and honest.

"That's cool," young Eric said. "But what would you do to me?"

Feeling a little uncomfortable, Gabe sighed. "I mean, realistically, I wouldn't do anything to you. I mean like, you wouldn't need me to try to beat you up because you'd already be doing that to yourself. And your own father would probably have some stuff to say to you that wouldn't feel very good. But really, it's all between you and God. It's sure not up to me."

Everyone sitting there listening to the conversation about a ridiculous scenario that would never happen, nodded their heads in silence. The youngest guy in the group had spoken words that touched their hearts.

Logan rubbed his knuckles over the top of Gabe's head. "You're a pretty cool guy, Gabe Tanner."

"Lily, Daisy, Gabe, come in and tell your father goodnight," Lizzy called from the door.

"Let's go," JoJo said, jumping up. "The men are home."

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Psalm 127:3-5

"Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, The fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, So are the children of one's

youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; They shall not be ashamed, But shall speak with their enemies in the gate."

Chapter Ten

Next Morning, Los Angeles, California

"You okay?" Chaz asked as he took Lisa's hand.

Lisa sighed as she gazed out the window of the cab. "It's funny, I swore I would never let my mother intimidate me again, and yet, the closer we get to the office, the more my stomach is doing somersaults. What is it with me, huh?"

"Hey, darlin', it's been almost nineteen years since you were last here, on your way to the Golden Hotels' executive offices. The last time you spoke to your mother, she was chiding you for being so upset that you'd caught her in bed with your fiancé. I'm sure you're just a little wary about what she might pull."

Lisa nodded, leaned her head against her husband's strong shoulder. "Thank you for coming along."

"No need to thank me, darlin'. You couldn't get rid of me if you wanted to." He cupped her cheek, tilted her face up toward him. "I love you, Lisa. With all my heart. I hope you know that."

She smiled. "I do."

He bent his head and kissed her softly. The cab driver cleared his throat and they looked up to see he'd pulled over in front of the building.

"Let's do this," Lisa said as she quickly got out of the cab.

Chaz paid the driver and followed her in.

They headed to the elevators, punched the button for the seventeenth floor. When the elevator stopped, Chaz stood against the door to allow Lisa by. Head up, shoulders erect, Lisa approached the young woman at the receptionist's desk.

"May I help you?"

"I'm here to see Lou."

The woman frowned. "I'm sorry, do you have an appointment?"

"I spoke to her yesterday and told her I would be in today. That's as

close to an appointment as she's gonna get."

The woman smiled, nodded, held up a finger and lifted the receiver on the phone. "I think I'm gonna need some help," the woman said quietly into the receiver.

"She called security," Chaz advised Lisa.

Lisa sighed. "Call off your dogs. Lou is my mother."

"Lou doesn't have any children."

"Actually, she does. She has a daughter, and that would be me."

Lisa moved quickly past the desk and walked down the hall to the door at the end, turned the knob and barged in, the young receptionist classically chasing after her. Chaz brought up the rear.

The woman who stood up, a look of indignance on her face only barely resembled the woman Lisa remembered as her mother. She looked old, feeble. She was sixty, yet Maddie, at eighty-four looked healthier than this woman.

"Lou?" Lisa asked.

The woman's brow creased. "Of course. Who do you think I am?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Lewis," the receptionist said. "I've called security."

"It's okay. Cancel security and close the door on your way out."

"Yes ma'am."

Lou waited until the door shut quietly before she actually allowed herself to look at Lisa.

"You've lost weight," Lou said.

"You have too," Lisa countered.

"And I see you still have that horrible tumble of red hair. A good salon could take care of that for you."

"Ms. Lewis? I'm Chaz, Lisa's husband," Chaz said, moving forward and extending his hand.

Lou took his hand, looked him over, smiled flirtatiously. "Well, Lees, you didn't do too badly here. A handsome cowboy. Who could blame you?"

Lisa only rolled her eyes.

"Why don't the two of you have a seat," Lou said as she walked to the bar. "What would you like to drink?"

"Just water," Lisa said.

"I'll have some of that Scotch," Chaz said, eyeing the expensive bottle.

Lou frowned, hesitated, then grabbed the bottle with a shrug. "I guess I can celebrate meeting my new son-in-law."

"Hardly new, Mother. We've been married almost nineteen years."

Lou shrugged again. "We've never been a close family."

"That's putting it mildly. Do you know that you have four grandchildren? The oldest will be a high school senior this fall."

Lou seemed disturbed by this news. She offered Chaz his drink and sat down with one of her own. "So tell me, Lisa, why now? Why have you insisted on coming to see me now? You can't believe that I would want to bounce your babies on my knee or some other ridiculous sentimental rubbish."

"No, not only do I not believe that, I would never allow that. I would never give you the opportunity to treat my children the way you treated me. I'm here because Grams wishes to see her only child before she dies."

"Grams?"

"Maddie. Your mother, Lou."

"My mother sent you to convince me to come home to see her?"

"No. Your mother is here, in Los Angeles and would like to have dinner with you."

Lou stood abruptly. Drained her glass, poured another and walked to the large corner window. "Mother is here in Los Angeles?"

Lisa thought she heard a softening to the voice. "Yes. She's old. Eighty-four. She wants to see her only child once more before she reaches the end of her life."

"Is she sick?"

"No, actually, she's quite healthy and quite active. She eats right, exercises and teaches culinary classes."

Lou turned, shrugged, walked behind her desk. "Impossible. I can't meet with her. I'm a very busy woman. Do you think you can just pop in and I should drop everything?"

Lisa stood, moved toward her mother. "Yes. You can and will drop everything and you will have dinner with her tonight. I've let you get away with everything you've ever done. You and your selfish ways. You don't care about anyone other than yourself, and just where has that gotten you, huh? You're a lonely, bitter old woman with no friends. No one likes you. The only people you have around are those who work for you or those who want something from you." Lisa had no idea if that was true but knowing her mother, thought it was a fair assumption.

"It's time you did one thing, just one thing for the person who brought you into this world," Lisa added.

"Lisa, you have no idea who my friends are and how many there are. I'm not lonely. I can have a man in my bed every night if I wish."

Lisa burst out with a rude laugh. "Gigolos hardly count, Mother."

"You little— "

Chaz jumped to his feet. "Okay, now, ladies, this isn't solving anything. Lou, if I may offer a suggestion."

Lou motioned toward him with her glass. "By all means, let's see what the eye candy has to say."

Chaz only smiled at the attempt at an insult. "Lisa and I have done some checking into the financial stability of Golden Hotels."

Surprised, Lisa's head whipped around, her eyes questioning.

"You what?" Lou fumed. "There is no way you could do that." Lou drained her glass and set it down with a thud.

Chaz gave a shrug. "We have friends in high places."

"Like who?"

"Like the Kinos."

"The Kinos? How do you know them?"

Chaz noticed the nervous tic that began just below her left eye. "All that matters is that we do."

"How dare you?" Lou practically growled, placing her hands flat on her desk and leaning forward.

Chaz, however, was not intimidated.

"I dared because I knew the woman Lisa described to me, the woman who's run roughshod over everyone that meant anything to her, would not want to come face to face with her past. I wanted to make sure you meet with Maddie, someone I care deeply for."

He glanced at his wife whose eyes sparkled with love. "So, let me fill you in. The Kinos recommended us to the law firm of Lee, Baker and Todd who have done some discreet investigatory work for us. Things are not so golden at Golden Hotels. The board has been looking to change the hotel's image and yet has been met with resistance by the President and CEO, uh, that would be you."

"This is ridiculous."

"As I was saying," Chaz went on, "Your perch on the top rung of the ladder is not as secure as you might think. The board is looking for a more homey image and my suggestion to you, if you like where you are, is to comply. What we, Lisa and I, are offering to you, Ms. Lewis, is a photo op."

"Give me a break."

"Working on that. You will have dinner with your mother and daughter this evening. You may arrange for a photographer if you wish. We all promise to appear genuinely happy to be in your presence. You may use the pictures in any way you choose so that you can show yourself in a different light before your board of directors. In your best interest, which by the way

is only because you gave birth to my wife, I suggest you think very hard about the image you want to project to the board. They're working on ousting you. Then you really would be, as my wife so eloquently put it, a lonely, bitter old woman."

Lou walked to the window, stared out. Lisa smiled at her gorgeous, strong husband, who never ceased to amaze her, before she turned to watch her mother. The woman appeared too thin, tired, old, washed up. Lisa almost felt sorry for her. Almost. It's not that Lisa had held a grudge all these years. She'd definitely let go of everything that had happened between her and her mother. Even the time when on Lisa's 26th birthday, Lou had called her to tell her she was pregnant. Lisa had done some investigating because she didn't want another child to grow up like Lisa herself. Lisa found it was just a big lie. It made her think her mother was so lonely and hurt that Lisa had left her that she made up another child. She'd forgiven her that. She'd forgiven her sleeping with her fiancé. She'd forgiven her everything. She'd even prayed for Lou's healing. Still, she wasn't naive enough to put herself in a place where Lou could hurt her all over again.

No one spoke. The room remained eerily quiet. When Lou finally turned, she looked like she'd aged another ten years. "Bring Maddie to the *Sun Room* at seven tonight."

Lisa's mouth opened. Had Chaz's bluff really worked? Because Lisa knew that's exactly what it was. A bluff. There had been no time to investigate Golden Hotels.

Lou glanced at her and then at Chaz. "You seem surprised, Lisa."

"I guess I am."

"I'm not," Chaz offered. "Lisa said you were a savvy businesswoman."

Lisa and Chaz turned and left the building. Chaz leaned close and whispered, "Not bad for eye candy, huh?"

"Not bad at all my big gorgeous cowboy."

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Laynah's wet, red curls streamed down her back. Her thighs gripped the sides of JoJo's neck. Her calves were wrapped around under his arms and her toes dug into his sides. Jacob couldn't take his eyes off her.

Lily, astride young Eric's shoulders, had Laynah's fingers locked with her own and she held on for dear life. Laynah was one tough cookie. Logan, with Taylor on his shoulders, moved in to team up with Lily against Laynah, who squealed when she realized it was two against one.

Jacob and his teammate, Daisy, had been the first victims of the Lily/Taylor team in the chicken fight. They now sat on the side of the pool, Daisy cheering on Laynah only because she was the current underdog.

Taylor now had hold of Laynah's shoulders from the back, but JoJo gave a twist of his body and Taylor fell forward, bringing Logan down with her. The two headed to the edge of the pool to watch the final match for supremacy between team Lily/Eric and team Laynah/JoJo. Jacob had no doubt who would win.

Laynah's hands were still locked tight with Lily's. JoJo moved past Eric while Laynah jerked hard. Lily flew backward off Eric's shoulders. Laynah raised her arms in victory. JoJo went under the water to ease her off his shoulders and they both swam over to the side of the pool.

Laynah emerged from the water right where Jacob sat with his legs dangling in the deep end. He looked down at her. She smiled up at him. He knew she liked him. She'd liked him since they were little. She'd even made it clear on her fifteenth birthday when she'd surprised him with a quick kiss. The problem was, their mothers ran the hotel business together and he'd been raised with Laynah. Even though they weren't related, he'd thought of her as a sister or cousin—until recently.

Jake was surprised to find that JoJo's interest in Laynah was sparking a strange feeling. If he had to put a name to it, he guessed it would be jealousy. Now, as she smiled up at him, with the water sloshing around her, he realized he'd taken her charms for granted. Still, whatever feelings they might have for each other would have to wait. He would be going into the military. If she was still available when he got back, he just might bark up that tree.

"Pizza's here!" Gabe called as he came out with a stack of pizza boxes in his arms. He set them down on one of the poolside tables as kids scrambled out of the pool.

Shelley and Bella brought out drinks and a giant salad. Lizzy carried plates and bowls, while Breez had napkins and silverware. Mickey carried a steaming bowl of hot wings.

Jodi helped arrange things on the table and then announced, "Okay kiddos, it's all yours. Please try to eat some salad along with the pizza. Us adults will be inside. And don't forget to bless the food."

Shelley smiled at the group of teens. They were such wonderful kids. Strong and mature. The boys were so much like their fathers. Shelley imagined her Eric was like them when he'd been just a teenager. The girls were amazingly beautiful—every single one of them. Lizzy's youngest twins, blonde and blue-eyed, Lisa's red-haired siren, Laynah, and Bree's Taylor, who looked very much like Shelley's own Jeffy.

Young Eric put his arm around Shelley. "Grandma? You okay?"

Shelley smiled up at him. "Just thinking about how much I love you

all."

He grinned at her. "Of course you were. Cuz that's just what you do." He kissed her cheek. "Grandma, go inside and relax. We promise to eat salad."

Shelley laughed. "Okay, okay, I'll get out of your way."

"You're welcome to stay out here with us anytime, Ms. K," Daisy said sweetly.

Shelley's eyes flashed with pleasure. "Thanks, sweetie, but I was young once too." She blew a kiss and went inside.

"She's so cool," Lily said.

"Yeah she is," Logan agreed. "Who wants to say the blessing?"

"I will," Gabe said. He bowed his head and quickly gave thanks. Logan immediately stuffed half a slice of pizza in his mouth.

"So, where are your parents tonight?" JoJo asked Laynah.

"They're having dinner at some posh restaurant with my grandmother, whom I've actually never met."

"Sounds like a story," young Eric said. "Tell us about it."

Laynah began telling the story of how her mother came into the world. Meanwhile, Laynah's little brothers, Charlie and Matt, along with the Davis boys, Dan and Jeremy, were having their own little pizza party downstairs in the game room.

The adults were at the dining room table along with the youngest children, including Lisa and Chaz's youngest, four-year-old Aralyn. Eric senior, Mark Adams, and John Appel were attempting to deal with the fears of Breez, Lizzy and Mickey, whose husbands were off on the largest Ameritech mission ever to be attempted.

Upstairs, Ricky and Bree were in their bedroom on a conference call with Toby Nash, his wife Caroline, and Jason Lee, working out the details of their plan to take Loksalle.



"Do I look alright?" Maddie said, as she smoothed her hand over her new blouse.

"You look exquisite," Lisa assured her grandmother.

Maddie smiled. She'd dressed to reflect her new ideas on life. She was a wife and mother, well, a widow and mother, but she was also a business woman. A modern woman. The frumpy, old-fashioned mother and housewife had metamorphosed into a slim, attractive, woman who loved life, thanks to her granddaughter. Oh, she still loved to cook and entertain, and she certainly still had her values and code of ethics, but she was now so much more. She was strong. Still, the one thing she'd never been able to

reconcile was the way her very own daughter had left her with hardly a backward glance.

"Now, Grams," Lisa said as they pulled up to the restaurant. "Please don't be hurt if she doesn't show much emotion. She's still the same Lou I remember."

"Don't you worry about me, Lisa. I have very few expectations. I simply felt a need to see my daughter once more, if only to be able to say goodbye."

"You going somewhere?" Chaz asked.

Maddie smiled. "Nope. Still, this could be the last time I see her for the next twenty years."

Chaz nodded. "I get it."

They climbed out of the cab. Lisa flipped her hair back over her shoulder and eyed Maddie. Her grandmother smoothed her slacks and straightened the matching, silk rose jacket. Her soft, white hair flipped under in a sleek pageboy that came to just below her ears. Lisa remembered when she'd been reunited with Maddie, the woman had looked like Mrs. Santa Claus. She was now slim, strong, and up-to-date. Still, she'd never lost that loving Mrs. Claus demeanor and she never would. That sweetness was Maddie to a "T."

The hostess led them to a large table in the back of the restaurant. Much to Lisa's surprise, Lou was already there, sipping on white wine. She rose as they approached.

Lou's eyes were fixed on Maddie and Maddie's on hers. Lisa stood back, gripping onto Chaz's arm and hoping Lou would be kind to Maddie.

Maddie put her hands to her cheeks. "Oh, Louise! It's really you!" She moved forward, hands outstretched. Lisa thought she would try to hug Lou, but instead, Maddie simply grasped Lou's hands in her own and squeezed.

"Mother," Lou said softly.

"Louise, you just look as beautiful as ever," Maddie exclaimed.

Lou shrugged. "I don't like getting old." Her face softened and she actually smiled. "But I have to say, you don't look anything like how I pictured you. You look good, Mother. I'm impressed."

Lisa's mouth dropped open as Lou leaned forward and kissed Maddie's cheek, and then the camera flashes went off and Lisa came back to reality.

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They were two strong, ultraphysical people and the chemical attraction had always been strong between them. Her body shuddered with pleasure as he kissed her.

"Oh, Jeffy," he said, grinding out the words.

"I am so in love with you," she whispered.

"I can't tell you how happy that makes me," he answered, smiling.

"I guess I gotta say that I see the wisdom in my father's advice to you. Things between us *are* different. Maybe I didn't look up to you, before. What does that say about me?" she said thoughtfully as her mouth turned down in a frown.

"What do you mean? You think it means you're proud, or haughty or prideful?"

"I guess."

"You had confidence, Jeffy. Nothing wrong with that. You saw things perfectly. I don't think you actually looked down on me. The thing is, I wanted you to look up to me. Maybe not in everything, but in something."

"I see that. I understand it now. A relationship works if each person has admiration and respect for the other. I may have liked you. I may not have looked down on you, but I didn't really give you any respect. I've learned to appreciate you and I def look up to you now. I respect you, Cam, for everything you've accomplished. It's been a long, hard row. And now, I'm lying here with the man I love and I'm in heaven. The only thing that could make this better is if I could walk out the bedroom door with you and go downstairs to dinner with my family."

He rubbed his calloused hands over the soft skin of her arm. "I know you miss them, Jeffy. You'll be home soon."

She smiled. "I know." She sighed. "Cam?"

"Yes?"

"I would like to go into town today. Do you think we can?"

"Hmm, there is really nothing we need."

"I know, but that festival is today and I'm feeling a little claustrophobic, know what I mean? I just want to see other people. It doesn't have to be for a long time. Just a short walk into town. Maybe buy something to give my mom and sister." She rose up. "Please," she whispered, kissing his cheek.

He set her away. "Do you think you can seduce me into taking you into town?"

"Can I?"

"No. Not if I thought there was danger."

"I almost seduced you in the field of butterflies against your better judgement," she countered.

He rolled his eyes. "And I'm not proud of that. We were lucky it was Jon sneaking up on us. I will not be making that mistake again. Fortunately for you, I think we're safe here for now in Kashen Village and I suppose a little trip into town couldn't hurt."

Sitting up abruptly, she clapped her hands together in glee. "Oh, yay! Oh, this is gonna be so much fun. I'll go get dressed."

He grabbed her, pulled her down, slowly kissed her lower lip.

She sighed. He had changed. He was much more forceful than he used to be, yet his kiss was still gentle. She tried to pull away. "Don't distract me. Let's get ready to go."

"I think I want to stay here and snuggle some more."

"Cam, not that I don't want to, but there's plenty of time for that later." She tried to roll away but he held onto her.

"Let me go," she ordered.

He grinned. "No."

He watched her face—could see her mind working. When her knee came up, he was ready. Blocking her with his thigh, he flipped her onto her stomach. She struggled to rise, and landed an elbow in his side.

He grunted and let her go briefly. She rose to her knees and turned on him with mischief in her eyes. She attacked. It gave him great pleasure to be able to block all of her efforts with ease. He laughed at her frustration which only made her more determined.

He allowed her to rise and they stood next to the bed and faced off, bodies in the ready, and minds alert.

She attacked first, pulling no punches. Apparently, she totally believed in his abilities to protect himself. He had a difficult time countering without actually hurting her, but found the challenge exhilarating.

They battled back and forth for fifteen minutes. Jeffy was tiring and Cam decided to take advantage of that. Locking his arms around her, he dragged her to the shower, turned on the water and pulled her in with him. His plan had been to brace her against the tile wall and kiss her into submission, but she wasn't having it. She continued to fight, not willing to let him get the upper hand so quickly.

Fighting in the slippery shower was not only fun, but it also required more skill. Finally, though, he had her pushed face first against the wet tile wall. He leaned close to her ear and whispered. "You've lost the battle. Concede."

"Never," she spat, struggling against him.

"Concede, little warrior," he whispered as he nuzzled her cheek.

"No," she breathed, but without conviction this time.

"Come on, Jeffy," he urged. "Tell me you concede. Tell me I win." He turned her around and kissed her soundly.

She whimpered.

"Say it," he demanded.

She sniffed. Drew a breath. "You win," she uttered.

The water turned cold. She shrieked. He quickly pulled her out of the shower, grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her. He wondered if she knew just how adorable she looked with her wet hair streaming down around her, her clothes soaking wet and her teeth chattering.

They went to their respective rooms and it wasn't long before they'd dressed, breakfasted, and walked a brisk twenty minutes into the town of Kashen Village. In the center of town, one entire street had been blocked off. Musicians and dancers in colorful African costumes commanded the majority of attention. Shopkeepers had special booths set up, loaded with goods and delicious smelling treats that had Jeffy's mouth watering.

Cam wore khaki colored slacks, a pale faded yellow t-shirt and had a camera hanging around his neck for effect. Jeffy had on green capris and a bright red and green shirt printed with faces and places depicting the Ugandan way of life. They looked like common tourists who'd come to town to enjoy an African festival.

Jeffy's hair was back in its usual braid. Even though there were many nationalities represented, it was pretty obvious that Jeffy and Cam were not locals.

They wandered through the town. Cam stood by patiently while Jeffy took forever to pick out gifts for her mother, sister and sisters-in-law. His eyes constantly scanned the crowd, taking note of anyone who took note of Jeffy.

A group of school children began to sing with the musicians, their voices clear and bright. Jeffy moved closer, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. Cam rested his hand on her back to offer emotional support. The children she loved were gone and it would probably be a long time before she would be able to put their memory to rest.

Cam turned at the sound of several cars cruising into town. Spotting the caravan, it consisted of a jeep and two trucks. Cam leaned toward Jeffy. "Time to go," he said quietly.

She glanced over at the vehicles. Several rough looking men along with several boys emerged.

"You expect trouble from these people?" Jeffy asked.

"LRA[3]," he whispered.

Her eyes grew wide. "Lord's Resistance Army? I thought they were in the Congo."

"Apparently not this group."

"Do you think they're here to cause trouble?"

"That may not be their purpose, but really Jeffy, they cause trouble

wherever they go."

"But maybe they just want to participate in the festival like everyone else."

"Maybe," Cam said. "But from the way everyone else is giving them a wide berth, I don't think I'm the only one who thinks there may be trouble. We need to get back to the house."

"I don't feel right just leaving," Jeffy said. "If these guys cause trouble, the people here are gonna need our help."

"Our help? What do you think the two of us can do against twenty men? We will let the village police do their thing."

"The village police? They can't handle this. What do you think they'll do?"

"If they're smart, they'll call in help."

Jeffy frowned.

"Look, I don't think they'd do anything here in such a public place, but I don't want to take a chance."

"Well, we have to do something. We can't just walk away."

"We can and we will. I have to get you home safely. You will save many more lives by fulfilling your medical mission than fighting these guys here today."

Sighing, Jeffy considered what he said. Knowing he was right, she nodded. "Okay, let's go."

They turned down a side street and made their way back toward the street that would lead them out of town toward the hospital.

Unfortunately, two streets over, just as they rounded the corner, six members of the group of the suspected LRA came around the other side, headed straight for them. Jeffy started to turn to head the other direction, but Cam grabbed her hand. "If you run the other way, that will only look suspicious and may cause them to come after us. Here, look in this shop window."

She turned toward the window, holding her breath as the men got closer. They were laughing, speaking crudely, drinking as they passed by. Jeffy thought she and Cam were in the clear when she felt a hand grab her backside. Gasping, she turned instinctively and knocked his hand away.

The men, who Jeffy and Cam noticed were on the younger side, stopped and turned, their eyes zeroing in on Jeffy.

"Help us, Lord Jesus," Cam muttered as he faced them.

He nodded at them, spoke in Luganda. "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

The men smiled, nodded, and eyed him. "You are American?"

"Yes."

"Is she your woman?" they asked, nodding toward Jeffy.

"My wife."

One of the men stepped forward, his face a mask of hatred. "Tell her she'd better learn her place."

Jeffy opened her mouth to respond.

Cam jerked her arm and then nodded, smiled. "It's something I must work on daily, I'm afraid."

Jeffy got control of her emotions and lowered her head, gazing at the ground in humility.

A long black finger touched her chin, tilted her face up.

Cam started to protest but the boy only smiled. "You are very beautiful." He looked at Cam. "If I were you I would keep her at home under lock and key."

Cam swallowed, nodded. "Good idea."

He held his breath. The young men seemed to lose interest and continued on. Grabbing Jeffy's hand, Cam moved quickly around the side of the building and took off. Thirty minutes later they were sitting inside their little house at the small dining table, eating lunch.

"We could've taken them," Jeffy said.

"The six of them—maybe," Cam agreed. "But the rest of them would've heard the ruckus and come running. We could've started a huge slaughter. Innocent people could've been killed. It's best that we were able to get out of there."

"I guess so, but it just irks me the way the world still sees women."

He smiled. "Well, don't worry, Dr. Kino, there's not many who underestimate you."

"I'm not worried about me. What about all the other women in the world? When will they be free to make their own choices? To lift their heads and walk without fear?"

Cam's lips pressed together. "Your father told me that the way to educate the world is not to try to teach them or force them, but to be a shining light, an example, and then those who are ready to learn and evolve will do so."

Jeffy's eyes filled with tears.

"What is it? Why are you crying?"

"I don't know," she muttered as she blinked and a tear rolled down each cheek. "I guess it's just hearing you say my father's words. I miss him so much. I can't wait to get home. Do you think it will be too much longer?"

"Well, I didn't want to say anything until I knew for sure what was going down, but I received a text this morning from Sweet."

"And?"

"And, he says something is going down and he'll be in touch soon, possibly as early as tonight."

"Tonight? Really?"

He smiled at her. "See, now you're all worked up and if he doesn't call tonight you'll be disappointed."

"Of course I will be, but it's okay. Don't keep things from me because you think you're protecting me. That's the same as making my decisions for me."

"I don't *think* I'm protecting you. I *am* your protector, currently. And as long as I am your protector, I will be making a lot of your decisions for you. But I won't keep things from you anymore. I'll keep you informed and you'll just have to handle my decisions."

She started to smart off, but remembering the morning's battle she stayed quiet. She didn't always have to win. She was actually liking Cam's strength.

He smiled at her. "How about the best two out of three in backgammon?"

"You're on, buster. Winner gets a full body massage."

"That gives me incentive to lose."

"Hah, thinking like a man for sure, Cam, though I have to point out, would you rather have your hands on me, or my hands on you? I'm telling you now, being a surgeon, my hands are very sure, very strong."

He grinned. "I guess either way, I win."

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"Are you sure you won't reconsider and stay with us? I hate to think of you in that hotel away from everyone else," Shelley said. "I mean, your friends are all here, and Laynah is really enjoying herself with the other kids."

Lisa looked toward Chaz. They'd dropped Maddie off at the hotel after having dinner with Lou and come back to the Kinos to collect their children.

"Sweetheart, maybe they'd like to have their privacy," Eric chided his wife gently.

"Oh, no, it's not that," Lisa said. "It's just that you have so many already. We'd really hate to add to your burden."

"Burden? None of the people here are burdens. And neither are you. Besides, little Aralyn is already asleep upstairs and Charlie and Matt are right in the middle of watching a movie with Gabe and Taylor. Please consider staying for the week."

Chaz smiled. "Okay then, we'd be happy to. Lisa, you stay here and I'll go back and collect Maddie and our things."

Shelley clapped her hands together excitedly. Jodi and Lizzy smiled with delight.

"The more the merrier," Shelley declared.

"If you're smart, you'll talk Maddie into doing some cooking for you," Jodi said.

"You won't have to talk her into it," Lisa added. "Just try to keep her out of the kitchen."

Chaz kissed his wife and left while Lisa went upstairs to check on Aralyn. Meanwhile, the older kids had migrated into the music room where Logan, young Eric and JoJo had entertained them with songs from their charity recordings. Once that died down, they'd branched off. Some played video games, some discussed college and career choices. JoJo had succeeded in luring Laynah down the hall to the weapons room where he thought he might be able to impress her with some of the trophies he'd won over the years.

"It's so big," Laynah exclaimed.

"Well, this large trophy is the one to be kept at the school where I trained, but instead, I presented it to Granddad to show respect. I have a personal trophy at my house. You'll have to come over one day."

"I'd like that. You'll have to come visit us at the Inn again. Gosh, the last time you were there I was only, I guess thirteen."

JoJo smiled. "We've grown up a lot since then."

Laynah nodded. Smiled.

"I'm, uh, I'm really glad your family came to visit," JoJo said. He reached up, pulled on a lock of her red curls.

"So, do you have, like, a girlfriend?" Laynah asked.

"Not right now. Do you have a boyfriend?"

She frowned. "Well, there's a boy I like, I guess."

"You guess?" JoJo asked, not letting on that the news didn't exactly make him happy.

"Sometimes I feel confused about it. I mean, I've liked him for a long time, but he ignores me. It's obvious he doesn't like me, at least, not that way. He has a girlfriend."

"He must be crazy."

She smiled up at him. "What are you saying?"

"I mean, if it was me you liked, I wouldn't be ignoring you. I'd be the happiest guy in the world."

"Aww, JoJo, how sweet."

"Geez, Laynah, I'm not trying to be sweet. I'm just saying, uh, what I mean is, I'm saying I like you. A lot."

She blinked up at him.

"And, like, I know we don't live near each other, but maybe, while you're here, I can make you forget about that guy for a little while."

She frowned for just a second and then smiled. "I like you too, Jo. And I think maybe you *can* make me forget."

She leaned toward him and JoJo took that as the invitation it was. Timidly, he started to lower his head, but stopped when she smiled. Maybe he shouldn't try to kiss her, but heck, there was so little time. Heart pounding, he placed his hand on her back to hold her still and leaned down. He pressed his lips to hers. They were warm and dry and soft and his teenage body responded. He pulled away, hoping he wouldn't embarrass himself.

"That was nice," she said softly.

He smiled. Blew out a relieved breath. "Yeah, it was."

"Kiss me again."

"Okay." He did as she commanded. She was so sweet, so beautiful and he wondered how some guy couldn't appreciate all that.

She made a soft sigh in her throat—and the door burst open. The two sprang apart.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry," Logan said.

JoJo scowled at his brother.

"Laynah's mom is here. Her dad has gone back to the hotel to get Miss Maddie. They're gonna stay here with us."

"Oh!" Laynah said. "Mom is here?"

"Yeah," Logan said.

She smiled back at JoJo. "I guess I'd better go up and see her, JoJo, but I'm glad."

"Glad?" JoJo asked.

"Yeah, I'm glad we're gonna stay here. Then maybe we can find more time to be alone and get to know each other better."

Logan grinned. JoJo smiled. Laynah left the room and ran up the stairs. Jacob came out of the music room as JoJo and Logan came down the hall.

"What's going on?" Jake asked.

JoJo smiled. "You mean the part about the Stewarts are gonna stay here at the house, or the part about Laynah kissing me?"

Jacob frowned. "She kissed you?"

"Well, I sort of kissed her first, I guess."

Jacob did his best to hide how he felt about it. "Well then, Jo, good for

you."



At Incirlik Air Base, 5 miles east of Adana, Turkey, the Ameritech agents and eight-man squad from SEAL Team 5 sat in a briefing room. Over the next few hours they would be working out every detail of the operation. The latest intelligence report gave specifics on numbers, exits, entrances, locks, surveillance, security, arsenals, etc.

Keegan had expected there to be egos and competition between the two groups, but found his and Jeff's own "hero status" reputations had done much to overcome any lack of respect. That, along with Joey's reputation as a Kino Challenge champion, Brayden's, Tristan's and Kaleb's former special ops standing and the Kino name itself helped. But the main mutual respect was from Jason Lee himself who helped to develop the SEAL training and put his own elite team through the same rigorous training.

The training for the operation would take place over the next few days. And then, showtime.

Keegan's mind wandered briefly to his newly pregnant wife. She was terrified that he wouldn't come home to her and he couldn't blame her. She'd been the mother of three and pregnant with twins when her first husband had been killed in Iraq. Until Keegan had come along, life had been one huge struggle for her. Yet, she'd been amazingly strong and brave and had earned his respect along with his undying devotion and love.

Should something happen to him now, financially, she would be set. Emotionally, would be another story. He shook his head. What was he doing? He knew better than to think like this before engaging.

A large hand rested on his shoulder. "Keeg?"

He looked over at Brayden, one of his buddies from Afghanistan. "Yeah."

"You okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Lizzy okay?"

Keegan blew out a breath. "She's pregnant."

Keegan heard Brayden mutter some vulgarity under his breath. It was several moments before his friend spoke again. "Listen, man, don't think about it."

"Trying not to."

"We'll get you home, Keeg."

"You know better than to talk like that to me. We'll do our job. Period." Keegan stated.

"We'll freakin' get you home, bro," Brayden repeated adamantly.

Keegan only sighed. Out in the field, you don't make promises. It's bad luck.



He'd been sound asleep. He'd won the backgammon tournament and the ensuing body massage administered by the ever-so-capable Dr. Kino had seduced him into a coma-like slumber.

He pushed that pleasant memory from his mind. Something woke him. He swung his legs over the side of his bed. He'd been sleeping with his pants on, for several reasons, the main one being for exactly what was currently going down. He grabbed up his weapon from the nightstand.

When he heard a small thump come from the other room he stilled, straining to hear more. He knew he had to act quickly. Clamping his hand over Jeffy's mouth, he leaned close to her ear. "Jeffy, wake up."

Gasping, she looked up at him with her large, doe-like eyes.

"Someone's in the house. I want you to take the keys and head out the window. If it's clear, get to the van. If not, head toward the house next door and hide on the other side of it. Take my cell phone and call Sweet."

He straightened and pulled her out of bed. "Move it. Now."

"I can't leave you," she whispered.

"Dammit, Jeffy, I can take care of myself, now go!"

At that moment someone crashed into Jeffy's room across the hall.

"Come here, little bird."

Cam grimaced. The male voice was laced with a thick Lugandan accent. Several others laughed. It was the men from town today. Question is, was it the six they'd encountered on the side street or the twenty total? He looked back at Jeffy who was dressed and raising the window. He nodded at her. She dropped out the window and was gone when the door burst open.

Cam immediately fired his weapon, dropping the two in the doorway. He dove toward the side of the bed as several shots peppered the room.

When two men came cautiously around the side of the bed, Cam shot again, but one kicked at his arm and the shot went wide while the gun was knocked from his hand. Instinctively, he pulled his knife, spun, stabbed one in the chest and kicked the other off balance.

"Take him alive," one shouted.

Yeah, Cam thought, take me alive and see where that gets ya. Only he knew the LRA was infamous for the torture they were keen to dish out, but he figured that at least now that they weren't trying to kill him with guns, he'd have a better chance. Or so he thought. It was just that having five or six good-sized men jump on you at once, odds were that someone is gonna

get in a few good licks. The odds won out.

They tumbled across the floor. Grunting with the exertion of trying to get leverage on the guy closest to him, Cam's elbow bashed in someone's nose. A second later, he grabbed the balls of another and tried to pull them off. The man shrieked. Before he could retaliate, Cam rose onto his knees behind the man and slit his throat.

A rifle butt rammed into the back of Cam's head and he fell forward. Suddenly, he was being pummeled by angry fists. He didn't quite lose consciousness because he was cognizant enough to realize they each had a piece of him and were carrying him into the front room where they dumped him unceremoniously on the floor.

The front door burst open. "I caught her," a man said with his arms around Jeffy's waist while she kicked and screamed at him. He set her down long enough to backhand her. She went down hard but immediately crawled over to Cameron.

"What have you done to him?" she screamed.

She patted his cheek. "Cam! Cam, please, talk to me."

He groaned in response. She looked him over. Blood oozed from his nose and mouth and somewhere on the back of his head.

"What have you done!" she cried as she rose and attacked the man nearest her.

She used everything her father had ever taught her and the man went down. It took two more to wrestle her into submission.

The one who'd spoken to Cam earlier that day moved forward, cupped her face. "Okay now, pretty white woman. It's time you and me have some fun."

She struggled to hit him but they held her fast, so she spit instead.

That earned her a hard slap and blood spurted from her lip.

Jeffy didn't feel fear. All her life, she'd felt like she'd been in touch with other-worldly forces. God, angels. Maybe that was why she felt no fear. Her faith was great and she knew there was definitely more to life than this earthly one. For whatever reason, at this moment, she felt no fear at all. Instead, she felt immense strength.

From where he lay on the floor, Cam took stock of the room. He knew he'd killed four. And Jeffy just dropped one, although he had no idea how long the guy would be out. Still standing were the two men holding Jeffy, two others, and the apparent leader, the one who'd just hit Jeffy. He would die for that.

So, there had been ten altogether and we are now down to five, Cam thought. Five was doable. He could handle five. He hated to do it, but he

would have to put into motion the plan Keegan had taught him. Divide and conquer. He needed to get them to take Jeffy into another room.

Moaning, he opened his eyes, slowly sat up.

"Cameron!" Jeffy cried. "Cam, are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. These morons are pansies."

He grunted when someone kicked him in the stomach.

"Stop!" Jeffy screamed.

"Listen to me, Jeffy," Cam said. "No matter what, don't let them take you back into the bedroom. Do whatever you have to do to stay here with me. Do not let them take you."

"But—" she started.

"No matter what," he said again. "You know why."

She looked at his face, nodded slowly.

The leader drew his knife, knelt down beside Cam. "I don't know what you think she can do to keep us from taking her back to the bedroom and doing things to her you could never even imagine."

Oh, he could imagine. He'd read plenty about the hideous things this group had committed.

Jeffy shook her head. "No. Please. Let me stay with Cam. Please."

"Take her back," the leader ordered before he turned to Cam.

Cam watched her go, kicking and struggling.

The leader moved closer to Cam, eyeing the tip of his knife. "Hold him," he ordered.

Two men knelt beside Cam, each locking one of Cam's arms and shoulders in their own.

The leader smiled just before he ran the knife slowly down Cam's chest, digging it deeply into his skin.

Cam grunted in pain, but forced himself to remain alert.

The man lowered the knife to Cam's groin then looked back up at Cam's face. "When I finish with her, I'm coming back in here, and we'll just see how much of a man you are."

The other two laughed.

Cam's eyes narrowed as he watched the leader walk back to the bedroom. He didn't have much time. "If I'm about to die, the least you could do is let me have a last smoke."

They nodded.

"Can you, uh, help me up?"

They helped him to his feet. It was the last thing they ever did. Before they even knew what was happening, Cam ripped out one's Adam's apple and shoved the other's nose back into his brain.

With lightning speed, he ran to the bedroom, stealthily slipped inside

the door. Jeffy's clothing was being torn away from her body. The two who'd dragged her back to the bedroom were on either side of her, holding her down. The leader knelt over her.

The two who held her down saw him and started to react, but Cam was too fast. He moved up behind the leader, put him in a headlock, twisted his powerful forearms and broke the man's neck.

Jeffy sprang free and battled with one of the remaining men while Cam took on the other. Cam finished his foe quickly, then turned to watch Jeffy for a few moments, his heart bursting with relief and pride. She was alive and well and beating the hell out of a man twice her size.

"Jeffy, we gotta go, baby."

As she turned to him the guy grabbed her by the hair and pulled her back against him.

"I'll break her neck," he threatened.

Cam's fist struck out so quickly, Jeffy hardly knew what happened. The man dropped to the floor behind her.

Jeffy took in Cam's appearance and her eyes opened wide. "Oh, Cam, you're bleeding!"

"Yeah, no time now. Come on."

"Geez, Cam, I can't leave you alone for even a few days, can I?"

Cam whirled. Staggered.

Agent Sweet moved forward, catching him before he went down. He was amazed that Cam was standing. He had a large gash across his chest and had obviously lost a lot of blood. His face was beat to a bloody pulp.

"Sweet," Cam breathed. "That's just great timing."

"Sorry, man. Thank God I was already on the way here to retrieve you guys. You wanna tell me what happened?"

"No time. LRA. There are about ten more somewhere in town. They could come looking for their comrades and I really don't feel like taking on ten more."

Sweet nodded at Jeffy. "Time to go, luv. Get some clothes and what you can grab in five minutes."

"I need to tend to Cam," she argued.

"Tend to him in the car," Sweet ordered. "Now move."

Cam turned, eyed Jeffy. She ran. Sweet lowered Cam to the bed, but Cam stood back up and immediately began gathering bags, weapons, clothing. Within five minutes they were in Sweet's van and driving away.

Jeffy knelt by Cam who was sprawled across a seat in the back. Her hands moved quickly, rummaging through Sweet's first aid kit, pulling out what she needed. Cam grunted a few times, but lay still while she ministered to him. She was sure he had lost consciousness once or twice

but he kept struggling to stay alert. Finally, she leaned close to his ear.

"Cam, be still. Let me take care of you. I have to make a few stitches so lie down and relax. You don't have to stay awake. We're safe right now. Sweet has already talked to Jason. Other agents are nearby and on the way to help protect us."

He shook his head. "I'm supposed to—"

"Stop being macho, silly man. You saved us both back there. Now relax and let me do my thing." She leaned forward, kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Cam. You were wonderful. I had no idea you are as good as you are."

"I told you before, you don't have to stroke my ego."

"It deserves to be stroked. Now shut up and let me work here."

He smiled and allowed her to tend him, struggling to not react to the pain.

Jeffy finished with Cam and went up to sit in the passenger seat. She smiled at Jon, but he frowned at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Your face is all swollen and bruised."

"It's nothing. I'm okay."

His lips pressed tightly together. "How's he?"

"He needs a hospital. He has a concussion and the cut is deep. I cleaned it the best I could and stitched it up, but it will probably get infected."

Sighing, Sweet nodded. "I know of a clinic, but it's about five hours away. Can he make it?"

"Yes," she said as she nodded, but was surprised by the emotions that welled up as she spoke.

Sweet reached out, took her hand. "Hey, look, I know what you just went through was hard."

She shook her head. "It's not that. Or, I don't think it's that. It's just that, oh, I don't know. I can't stand to see Cam hurt."

"I get that."

"And I'm tired, Jon. I just want to go home. I want to see my mom and dad."

"Soon, Dr. Kino. That's why I was on my way to get you guys. A raid is going down in two days. After that, a large group of Ameritech agents will be escorting you home."

The tears spilled over. "Thank goodness," she said softly, unable to control the emotion.



"Okay," Toby began, "so, I'll keep the ladies close while you make your way into Loksalle's penthouse suite and gather what information you can.

Meanwhile, the mission in Kazakhstan is going down at the same time."

"Right," Ricky answered.

"And if Loksalle's little army is able to reach him before they're taken completely out of commission, he will try to get on his private jet and get out of the country."

"Right."

"But he won't be able to because you are gonna stop him."

"Right."

"And you won't have any help to do this because the guest list is highly secure."

"No one could ever question your ability to comprehend," Ricky joked.

"Funny, Kino. I just can't believe this guy would actually make an appearance here in the states so close to you guys."

"Obviously he has ulterior motives. What those are I'm not sure though Jason may have his own ideas. All I know is we won't sit by and take no action against the guy who is trying to kill my sister."

"I can't imagine you sitting by ever."

"Listen, Toby, if you don't want to be involved I completely understand."

"Ricky, Caro and I are adamant about having the courage to do the right thing. This is the right thing."

"Thanks."

"Besides, we haven't had any real adventures since Caro and I were accused of murder back some twenty-odd years ago."

Ricky chuckled. "Well then, glad to accommodate."

"Anyway, after the video meeting with Jason, Caroline can't stop talking about anything else so I couldn't back out now if I wanted to."

"Jason has a way about him when it comes to the ladies," Ricky said as he glanced at his phone which was vibrating. "Speaking of Jason, he's trying to reach me now."

"Take the call. I'll be in touch later tonight."

Ricky clicked over. "Yeah, Jason, what's up?"

"Rick, trying to reach your father. Keeps going to voicemail. I think he may have his phone off."

"Hmm, that's not like Dad. I'll go check it out and have him give you a call."

"Thanks."

"Everything okay? You don't sound too good."

"Have to talk to your father first."

Ricky sighed. "Right away." Rising, he charged down the stairs and immediately spotted the problem. He knelt down in front of Joey's

daughter, three-year-old, Sophia.

"Hey, Phia," Ricky said softly.

She smiled up at him, a gleam in her eye. "Hi Uncle Wicky."

"What ya got there?"

"Gwanddaddy's phone."

"Does he know you have it?"

She frowned. "It was on the table. He wets me play wif it."

"Hmm, okay. Well, next time you want to play with it, I want you to ask him first, okay?"

Her chin trembled. He scooped her up, hugged her. "Here, play with mine for a little while. I have some cool games on there."

Her face lit up. He sat her down and showed her how to draw pictures on his phone.

Breez came into the room, holding a sleeping baby. "Oh, there you are, Sophia. What are you doing?"

"Uncle Wicky wet me pway wif his phone."

Ricky smiled, held up Eric's phone. "Gotta go. Have fun."

He headed for his father's study.

"Hey Dad," he started. "Oh, sorry, didn't mean to interrupt."

John Appel smiled up at Ricky. "No problem, Rick. We were just talking over old times."

Ricky handed the phone to Eric. "Jason's trying to reach you. Sounds important."

Eric hit the button and Jason answered immediately.

"Eric, have news."

Eric showed very little emotion while Jason filled him in on Jeffy's and Cam's status.

"His injuries are not life threatening," Jason continued. "They're on their way to a clinic near the Rwandan border."

Eric sighed. "And you say Jeffy wasn't hurt?"

"They slapped her around a little and she's a bit banged up but she's okay. From what Agent Sweet says, Cameron pulled off a miracle, defending her against ten LRA singlehandedly. Well, actually, he said Jeffy took one guy out herself and helped with others."

Eric tried to smile. "That's my baby."

"Not much longer, Eric. She'll be home by the end of the week."

He nodded. "Yeah. Now I just have to break this latest news to Shelley."

"Or not," Jason suggested.

"How long have you been married?" Eric questioned.

"Yeah. You'd better go tell her immediately."

Smiling, Eric ended the call and nodded at John and Ricky. "John, would you mind calling the group together? We have some news of Jeffy's latest adventure."

"So I heard. Happy to help. I'll go gather the troops. Meet you in the living room."

Eric nodded, his eyes met Ricky's. They didn't need to speak. Each knew exactly what the other was thinking.

"So, son, do you feel ready for your escapade into Loksalle's domain?" Eric asked.

"Born ready, Dad. You know that."

Eric nodded. "Yes, I do, still, it's my role to ask."

Ricky smiled with pride at his father. The man quietly took care of the business of life steadfastly and meticulously. "Have I told you lately what an amazing man I think you are?" Ricky said.

Eric smiled. "Have I told you?"

Ricky returned the smile. Eric put his arm around his son's shoulders. "Come on, let's go tell the family the latest."

✝✝✝

Psalm 22:16-18

"An evil gang is around me; like a pack of dogs they close in on me; they tear at my hands and feet. All my bones can be seen.
My enemies look at me and stare. They gamble for my clothes and divide them among themselves."

Chapter Eleven

"Cam! What are you doing up?" Jeffy asked, her brow furrowed.

"The concussion is mild, the knife wound has been cleaned and bandaged—again. Shots are up to date, antibiotics have been dosed. I'm good to go."

"You should rest."

"Right."

She glared at him. He pulled her against him and cupped her face in his hand, rubbing his thumb gently across her bruised cheek to her swollen lip.

"Does this hurt?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. "No. Not much anyway."

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"For letting this happen to you."

"You can't control what others do."

"Yep, but I shouldn't have taken you into town."

"How could you have known that members of the LRA would be there? No one knew. It just happened."

"I should've been more cautious. With you, overly cautious is not even enough."

"Stop it, Cam. You did everything right. You saved me. You saved us. You—" She shook her head, thinking of what she'd witnessed.

"What?"

"Nothing. I mean, it's just that, I know you're Jason's Elite, but, I guess I didn't know just how bad you are."

"Does that bother you?"

"Not really, it just takes some getting used to, but it doesn't bother me. You do know who raised me, right?"

"Yes, but I also know Grandmaster Kino and your mom are two of the kindest, gentlest people I've ever known."

"Yeah, they are and what makes them kind and gentle is they understand the need for strength to be able to defend the meek in this world. They're strong and skilled and yes, deadly, well, I mean, Dad is anyway. And those skills are what allows them to be peaceful and be loving and be gentle and kind. Your strength and your skills allow you the same luxury."

"Jeffy," he said softly. "I hope I am always equal to the task of defending you because the world needs your wisdom."



The few men around the arsenal of weapons had been neatly and quietly dispatched. Joey was glad of that. So far, everything had gone down as expected.

They were divided into three groups. Joey and Keegan led one. Brayden led the other. The SEALs did their own thing, which was only to offer support and control where necessary.

They moved forward toward the barracks. At this early morning hour the men would be sleeping, at least the majority of them. Joey watched as Brayden's men disappeared around the corner. Brayden turned and signaled and Joey, Keegan, and their men moved toward the opposite side.

"It's a go," Brayden's voice sounded softly in Joey's earpiece. Joey's eyes met Keegan's.

"You okay?" Keegan asked.

"Let's do this," Joey said.

They burst through the doors of the barracks.

The noise was deafening. Men shouting, running, and grasping for weapons became the recipe for what seemed to Joey like mass confusion. Shots rang out as Keegan took out one bad guy who'd swung his AK-47 around toward them. Across the room, another shot rang out as Jeff Davis did the same.

One of Jason's Elite began yelling in Russian, explaining that they were had and it wasn't worth dying for. Most of the hundred some odd men in the barracks agreed, raising their hands in the air.

When one mercenary reached for a gun under his bunk, Joey raised his weapon. "Don't do it," Joey warned.

"You think you have us?" the man responded in a thick accent. "You have no idea who you're dealing with."

"Apparently, neither do you," Joey stated dryly as he moved forward and removed the weapon.

The door burst open. Tristan and Kaleb ushered in six men, one who was being supported by two of the others. Tristan threw their confiscated

weapons into the pile that was growing as the Elite searched the building, the bunks and the men.

"They were in the mess," Tristan explained. "They were trying to get to communications to get a message off to their fearless leader."

"Problem is, one of their comrades had already beat them to it," Kaleb said.

"And where is that comrade?" Keegan asked.

Kaleb sighed. "He didn't make it. I breached the door, he fired, I had to take him out."

The SEAL team helped tie up loose ends, keeping control, rounding up the prisoners who would be transferred into international custody under the authority of a United Nations counterterrorism tribunal. They searched the rest of the elaborate facility, finding several more who'd chosen to hide when the fighting went down. The entire operation took less time than a trip to the grocery store. The longest time was spent waiting for the transport trucks to roll in. The prisoners were loaded onto three trucks, the dead were handled appropriately. Arrangements were made for American soldiers to take inventory of the weapons and arsenal and complete their transport.

The entire operation went off without a hitch, that is until the men headed back toward the rendezvous point. Moving silently, they stopped suddenly when they heard voices. Keegan raised his hand. The group readied their weapons, their eyes scanning the surrounding forest as they spread out.

"Step forward and identify yourselves," Brayden ordered.

One of the men repeated the command in Russian.

Keegan motioned silently to Tristan and the two of them sank back behind their own line to circle around and come up on the other side of whomever was in their path.

Joey heard the cocking of a rifle. "Last chance," he called.

Four men stepped onto the path from the cover of the trees, each with a weapon, two with full auto machine guns.

Joey's face paled but he held his weapon steady.

"Put your weapons down," Brayden ordered. "Now!"

"We have superior firepower and we like killing Americans," one answered in a thick accent. "You put yours down."

"Yeah, that's not gonna happen," Kaleb responded, his finger lightly stroking his gun.

Two of the SEAL team stepped out from their cover, both holding a SEAL favorite, an MK43 Mod 0 machine gun. "Giving you a second to reconsider," one SEAL said.

At that moment Keegan and Tristan came up silently behind the

mercenaries and nodded at the SEALs.

"Last chance, drop your weapons—now!" the SEAL ordered.

"You drop yours," one mercenary answered.

"Take them," the SEAL said softly.

Keegan and Tristan moved up and quickly dropped the two with machine guns, as Joey and Brayden moved forward to take out the other two. However, one of the mercenaries turned back quickly and fired his gun before he was struck down.

Grunting with the force of the bullets, Keegan went flying backwards, landing on the soft forest floor.

Brayden cursed as they rushed to Keegan's side.

Joey, Brayden, Tristan and Kaleb surrounded Keegan, rolled him on his back. Joey ripped open his shirt, bile rising in his throat as visions clouded his brain from when he himself had been shot in the chest on the courthouse steps. Pushing the memories aside, he examined Keegan. There was no blood. The vest was in place. He counted the bullets. He'd been hit four times.

Keegan moaned as he regained consciousness.

There were smiles and great relief as they realized he was okay. The vest had stopped the rounds, but judging by the agony across Keegan's face, his ribs had absorbed every bit of their force.

"Stop complaining you big baby," Brayden said.

"Get your butt up," Tristan ordered.

They gently pulled Keegan to his feet.

❁

Ricky admired his wife from a distance. Bree was his light. She owned his heart and soul. When he'd met her, she'd been an eighteen-year-old virgin and a wannabe actress who was feisty, ballsy, confident and talented. Ricky, being a martial arts superhero, had already made a dozen or so movies by the time he'd met her and had been happy to introduce her around.

He'd fallen quickly and easily for Bree. Her mother had been dating his father and when Ricky met Bree, well, she'd knocked his socks off. She'd been nothing like her mother, who was sweet, innocent and even a little naive. No, Breanna Adams was a fireball. Not only that, she was not overly impressed with his movie star status. As a matter of fact, she'd wanted him to relieve her of her virginity but not have any kind of relationship that would give him claim over her. In other words, she'd wanted to keep her freedom. Those days had been hard. Hard on his heart. Hard on his ego. He was on Hollywood's A list with a giant fan base of screaming women, yet

Bree wanted no part of that.

It took him eight years to make her realize that she was as in love with him as he was with her. He smiled at the memory. She never did anything halfway. So when she finally admitted to loving him, he received her full attention. He was a very lucky man. Now here they were, twenty-seven years and two children later, all dressed up in one of Golden Hotel's ballrooms at a gala given for the elite of the entertainment industry, an event hosted by the same man who was trying to facilitate the extermination of their sister.

In a few short moments, Ricky would wend his way up to the penthouse suite. He would use the special key card given to him by Jason to access the suite and he would find Loksalle's computer and he would quickly download its contents onto a tiny external hard drive. All this, while Toby Nash kept a close eye on Bree.

The raid in Kazakhstan should be taking place about the same time. If Echlon Loksalle receives word that they have been breached, he will try to leave the US quickly. Ricky intended to keep that from happening. As far as he was concerned, Loksalle was funding terrorism and he would be brought to justice.

Ricky scanned the crowd of Grammy, Tony and Oscar winning artists, searching for their host. He found him in a corner, surrounded by a large group, toasting one of the music industry's biggest stars. The gall of this man funding a hit on Jeffy Kino while parading around, hobnobbing with the Hollywood elite pretending to be some kind of philanthropist made Ricky want to punch the man right in the throat. Ricky tried to keep those feelings in check. As it turned out, Jason had been able to infiltrate the wait staff for the event with Ameritech agents and tried to get Ricky and Bree to change their minds and stay home, but no way was Ricky gonna back down and hide from this punk while someone else did the work when he could do it himself. He didn't have it in him.

Ricky's eyes moved back to his wife. Bree glanced up from the crowd that had gathered around her and smiled at him. He winked at her. She blew him a kiss. He glanced at his watch and then at Toby who stood next to his wife, Caroline. Toby nodded and Ricky was off.

Toby and Caroline immediately moved in closer to Bree. In their briefing with Jason, they'd learned that this event could very well be Loksalle's attempt to pull a few Kinos away from their bodyguards and have them vulnerable. If Loksalle was able to kidnap Bree or Ricky, June Flower would come running to the rescue, giving herself up to save them. Thankfully, Toby wasn't all alone in trying to protect Bree since Ameritech agents were present. Still, there were only a few of the agents and they

couldn't be everywhere. Toby would make sure no one got close to Bree.

Meanwhile, Ricky stepped off the service elevator on the 42nd floor, moved to the door and held his breath while he tried the key card. He blew it out again when the tiny light flashed green. Silently, he opened the door and slipped inside. Any number of people downstairs at the gala would notify him if Loksalle excused himself from the crowd. With the A-list guests though, Ricky didn't think that would happen.

Quickly, Ricky checked the entire suite to make sure he was alone. Loksalle's computer was easily found as it sat open on the desk. Ricky wasted no time, fired it up, plugged in the tiny, high-capacity flash drive that would quickly unlock the computer and begin the transfer. While he waited for the upload to complete, he went to one of the bedrooms and rifled through some drawers, finding a 1911 nickel-plated handgun with pearl grips, loaded. He removed the bullets and pocketed them before he returned the gun to its place and headed back out to the desk.

As Ricky waited for all the files to download, his phone went off. "Yeah," Ricky said.

"You're gonna have company in about one minute so get out of there," Jason said.

"Loksalle?"

"No, his right hand man and a few others. The raid went down, one guy got a message off to Loksalle. The guys who've been circling Bree trying to get close to her headed upstairs immediately. Presumably to grab stuff and go. Now get out."

"It's almost done. They don't know I'm here, right?"

"They lost track of you, though they may not be surprised to find you up there and I'd rather that not happen, so take what you've got and get out, Rick."

"Will do." He pocketed his phone and looked at the computer. The download was ninety percent complete. Just another few seconds he thought. He glanced at his watch, waited about ten seconds, decided he couldn't wait any longer, removed the flash drive and was headed out when the door to the suite opened.

A man whom, to Ricky, looked like a very proper English butler, stepped into the room. The man quickly pulled a .357 magnum and pointed it at Ricky's chest. Behind the butler-looking dude were three more, only they had more of a thug-type look going for them. Two of the three also held guns. The one without had only a smile and a set of beefy fists.

Ricky held his hands up. "Whoa now, fellas. It appears you caught me red-handed."

"It appears so," the butler agreed.

"This could be a very sticky situation that would cause some unwanted publicity, don't you think? Look around. As you can see, nothing is disturbed, nothing is missing, so, if you'll excuse me, I'll just get back to the party."

"I don't think so," the butler said dryly.

"Then what is it you propose?" Ricky asked.

"I propose you have a seat over there," he said, gesturing with his gun toward the settee. "Place your hands behind your back and Alnon here will secure you."

"And then?" Ricky asked.

"And then we will be transporting you to a more secure facility."

"For a ransom?"

"That is none of your business."

"Who are you, anyway?" Ricky asked.

The man smiled, gave a slight bow. "I'm pretty sure you already know who I am. I am the head of Mr. Loksalle's personal security."

Ricky frowned. "So, I guess we can let all pretenses drop. You realize that we know it's your boss who's been trying to take my sister out of the picture. And now he's trying to take me? He's willing to get the negative publicity that Ricky Kino disappeared during his little spectacular that plays on the egos of Hollywood?"

"All hell's about to break loose anyway. We had no doubt that one of the men captured in Uganda would talk and that there was a possibility that you would know who is trying to get rid of Dr. Kino. Add that to the fact that you accepted the invitation to the gala, we thought it a possibility you may try something."

"Try something? Like what?"

"We thought you might try an assault on Mr. Loksalle's person perhaps," the butler guy said.

"Well, see, you were wrong about that. I had no intention of assaulting Loksalle."

"Regardless of your intentions, Mr. Kino, the truth is you have presented yourself to us and may be our ticket out of the country, now, you will have a seat."

"I'd rather not," Ricky quipped.

"You do realize we have guns and you are sorely outnumbered."

Ricky shrugged. "If you shoot me, you will have nothing with which to bargain."

"Still, even without the guns, there are four of us."

"I don't see that as bad odds."

"Surely you boast."

"That remains to be seen."

"You are being tedious."

Ricky laughed. "Please, accept my apologies."

The butler sighed loudly. "Secure him," he ordered.

Ricky spun, kicked, spun, punched, blocked and delivered near-lethal blows. Within seconds he'd taken out the two with guns and now stood face to face with the smiling big guy.

The big guy didn't want to go down quite so easily. Ricky had to work at him, finally going for his knees and then his eyes. Just as the tree fell a shot rang out.

Ricky stumbled back, grabbing his leg. Grimacing, he looked up at the butler. "You just made a mistake."

The butler moved forward, a snide smile on his face. "Hit the thigh. I doubt you'll die from it."

"You may though," Ricky said quickly as the guy made the mistake of coming within his reach. Ricky's hand shot out like lightning, grabbed the man by the front of his tight little bow tie and jerked him down. His forehead smacked the floor with a thud. He gave a soft moan before he went still.

Ricky collected guns, straightened his clothes, checked his pocket to make sure the hard drive was still there and bent over to examine his thigh. He mumbled a soft curse before he smiled. He hadn't seen action outside of the practice ring in a long while. It felt good to know he still had it.

His phone went off again.

"Yep."

"You made it out?"

"Nope."

"Okay, well, you wanna fill me in please?"

"Four bad guys down and I've been shot in the leg but I'm okay."

A sigh from Jason before he spoke. "The place is being raided right now. Can you make it downstairs or do I need to send help?"

"No, I can make it. I'm headed down now. But you'll need to have someone tend to the mess up here."

Back downstairs, Bree ran to him the minute she saw him step off the elevator, throwing her arms around him. "Oh, Ricky, I'm so glad to see you." She raised up and kissed him long and hard.

He pulled her away, smiling down at her gorgeous face. "Ditto. Where's Toby?"

"Right here," Toby said from behind him. "Loksalle got the message a few minutes ago that his mercenaries have been taken out of the picture. Agent Rucker was serving champagne to him when the call came in.

Rucker notified Jason and several agents are in the garage detaining Loksalle. Did you get the information off Loksalle's computer?"

"Yeah," Ricky said breathlessly. "I got it. We should have enough evidence to bring this guy all the way down. So, I talked to Jason, he has things under control. You guys ready to get out of here? I'm pretty sure FBI will be filling the place any time now."

Toby noticed Ricky's pale face and the perspiration above his lip. "You okay, Rick?"

Ricky winced. "Actually, I'm not feeling so great. I ran into a little bit of trouble upstairs." Ricky reached down and gripped the front of his thigh.

Toby, Caroline and Bree looked down and saw the bleeding hole in Ricky's leg at the same time.

"Oh, Ricky, you're hurt!" Bree cried.

"You've been shot!" Caroline said, stating the obvious.

"It's not so bad," Ricky said. "But let's get outta here."

Toby braced Ricky up while Bree supported his other side and Caroline ran to open doors.

"Tell me the other guys are worse than this," Toby said.

"Well, I didn't shoot them, but they weren't moving when I left the room," Ricky mumbled.

❁

Jeffy lay wearily on the floor of the small hut, her head resting on Cameron's thigh. Cam's hand moved slowly up and down her back, comforting and soothing. Agent Jon Sweet looked out the tiny window, watching and listening for the plane that carried their escort.

They'd arrived at the rendezvous point six hours earlier and now it was simply a matter of waiting. Jon felt restless and on edge. He moved away from the window, paced the floor.

"Why don't you sit down and tell me how your parents are doing," Cam said softly, trying to distract him.

Jon blew out a breath, collapsed on the floor, leaning his back against the wall. "They're fine. Dad just bought a boat and apparently they've become quite the sailors. Dad says Mom talks more about going out than he does. He says she's found another love."

Cam chuckled. "And your sister?"

"She's getting married next month."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't sound so surprised. She did eventually get over her infatuation with you."

"That doesn't surprise me at all," Cam said, quickly glancing down at

Jeffy to see if she was awake. "So, who's she marrying?"

"Some guy she met at school. I've only seen him twice. He seems okay. A little standoffish."

"I thought you told me Australians were never snobby."

Jon smiled. "Did I say that? Must've been drunk."

"As a matter of fact, you were," Cam laughed.

Jon blew out a breath, stood back up when he thought he heard an engine. "I can't stay relaxed like you two," he complained. "This waiting is making me crazy."

"What's the alternative?" Cam asked.

"Apparently, there is none. I have no choice but to wait."

"Exactly. So, just live in the moment. This moment, right now, that's all there is."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Got it, oh wise one."

Cam smiled. He didn't say that he too hoped the plane would arrive soon. The sun would be going down and he didn't want to have to light the field. At that moment, his eyebrows raised as he heard a low, humming sound. "I think they're here."

Jon perked up, looked out the window, but saw nothing. He opened the door. "I hear them. Thank God."

Jeffy lifted her head. "They're here?"

"Think so."

She stood, ran out the door behind Jon, clasping her hands together in front of her chest.

Cam stood at the door, looking out over the horizon. His eyes moved to Jeffy. Things were about to change. She'd had nothing but him to depend on over the past difficult days. Now though, she would have her family. He was happy to step aside because he knew she craved seeing and being with her family. They were all so very close. Cam just hoped he and Jeffy wouldn't lose the close bond they'd only recently developed.

The plane came into view and Jeffy jumped up and down in excitement. It made him smile. This genius woman who was about to change the entire world was so very child-like. Her brother Joey would be on this plane. Jeffy hadn't seen him for well over a year. It should be fun to watch her joy.

They watched as the plane touched down, slowed, and finally rolled to a stop a few hundred feet from where they stood. The doors opened and several men in full military regalia jumped out, securing the area.

Cam and Jon had made several full sweeps of the area over the past six hours, but understood there was no taking chances.

Jeffy took off at a run. One of the men, threw down his rifle, jerked off his helmet and opened his arms, a huge grin on his face.

"Joey!" Jeffy cried.

She never slowed down. She hit him full speed, knocking them both back. He wrapped his arms around her while she buried her face against his shoulder.

"Joey, oh, Joey," she cried over and over.

Finally, she raised her head.

He took her face in his hands and kissed both her cheeks.

Smiling merrily, he looked her over. "Hey kiddo," he said softly. "You okay?"

"Oh, yes. I'm wonderful! I'm just so happy to see you. I've missed you so much. I miss everyone so much."

He pulled her against him, hugged her hard. "We've missed you too, baby girl. It's like, there's been no sunshine without you there. Life has been gray."

"Oh, now, I don't believe that. I believe there is sunshine in your life by the names of Breez, Sophia and Kelstyn.

Joey grinned at her. "Of course, you're right. Still, I can speak for everyone, we are not whole without you."

She hugged his neck again, squeezing as hard as she could.

Joey finally set her back, making an effort not to comment on her bruised face. Reaching past her, he extended his hand. "Cam, good to see you, man."

Smiling, Cam nodded. "Really good to see you too."

Joey frowned. "You look a little pale."

"I'm fine. Just a little worse for wear."

Joey nodded. Turned to offer his hand to Jon. "Sweet, good to see you. Thanks for taking such good care of these two."

Sweet shrugged. "Somebody had to do it."

Cam rolled his eyes.

The three men jumped when Jeffy screamed and ran past Joey. "Jeff! Oh, Jeff!" She jumped into Jeff Davis' arms, hugging him and kissing his cheeks over and over.

He laughed, and hugged her back before he set her down. "Good to see you, Jeffy," he said, his eyes smiling in love and adoration.

She jumped up and down and hugged him again. She'd had a crush on the man back when she'd been seven-years old and he'd been just twenty-two. The blond-haired, green-eyed Adonis had been a bodyguard for her sister, Bree. He, his wife Mickey and their boys were now like family to the Kinos and Mickey's sister, Marissa, was one of Jeffy's two best friends.

Jeffy looked past Jeff and screamed again. "Keegan!" she cried.

Everyone watched as she gave him the same treatment as Joey and Jeff.

Cam smiled. Jeffy had so much love to give. She spread it around liberally.

"I can't believe you came out here just for me," she exclaimed.

"I'd say you're pretty important," Keegan answered.

Jeffy kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome. Whaddya say we hurry and get refueled and get you home?"

"I can't tell you how much I want to go home. Especially to see Mom and Dad. I miss them so much it hurts."

Keegan smiled as he watched Jeffy spin in a circle, run back to Joey and hug him again.

"We have to refuel," Joey said. "Let's get you on the plane."

Jeffy started toward the plane but stopped and turned, reaching her hand out to Cam. "Are you coming?"

Cam took her hand. "I'm right here," he said.

Joey watched with interest.

Twenty minutes later, they were in the air and headed for Kigali International Airport in Rwanda. From there, one of Ameritech's jets would take them home.

Two hours later, they'd boarded the jet, had been fed and were on the way home. Joey walked back to where Jeffy and Cam sat side-by-side talking quietly. He smiled at Jeffy, held up a phone.

She looked up, her eyes questioning. "What?"

"There's someone who wants to speak to you."

Jeffy took the phone. "Hello?" There was a large sniffle before she heard the voice.

"Oh, Jeffy," Shelley exclaimed. "Oh, my baby, I'm so happy to hear your voice."

"Mom?" Jeffy said, her voice breaking. "Oh, Mom." She couldn't say anything else as the tears streamed down her face and her body shook with all-consuming sobs.

Joey started to reach for her, to comfort her, but stopped himself when Cam scooped her up and pulled her into his lap, cradling her softly against his body. Smiling, Joey backed off and took Jeffy's vacated seat, resting his hand on her back to add his strength to Cam's.

Jeffy finally recovered enough to talk. "Mom? Are you still there?"

"Yes, baby, I'm here."

"Sorry, I got a little choked up."

Shelley laughed. "It's okay. So did I."

"I miss you so much, Mom."

"I miss you too baby, but it won't be too much longer now. Joey says in twenty-four hours you'll be home."

"I'm trying to put that twenty-four hours into perspective. Mathematically, twenty-four hours represents a mere zero-point-two percent of the five hundred days I've been gone, but now, for some reason, just one day seems an eternity away."

Shelley giggled at her math. "I know, baby. It does for me too, but you know what your father would say."

Jeffy laughed. "He'd say to stay in the present moment. Where is Dad? Is he there?"

"I'm right here, baby girl," Eric said.

Jeffy felt the warmth of his deep, softly spoken voice wash over her and the tears came again. "Daddy, I," she broke off.

Cam held her tighter as her body and spirit went through the same cleansing process as before.

"Does it seem you're far away from me, Jeffy?" Eric asked when she'd quieted. "Because you're not. You're right here, not an inch from me. The energy that is you is right here, blending with mine. Quiet your mind, sweetheart and feel. Don't you feel it? Just like we are part of God, you are part of me. Your energy is part of mine and mine is part of you. I'm right there in that plane with you. Don't you feel me? I feel you."

She closed her eyes. Breathed deeply. "I do feel you, Daddy. It's almost like I can smell you."

"There, you see? When you can truly see who and what we are, you can experience life in a whole new way. You don't have to know anything special. You just have to let go. Let go of this missing stuff. How can I miss you when you're right here?"

"That doesn't keep me from having the desire to have you put your arms around me and hold me."

"Desires are good. I have that same desire, but no more misery over not having what we want. That's where the resistance messes us up and causes us pain. No more resistance. Let go. No more pain."

"Oh, Daddy, I love you so much. You too, Mom. I have so much to tell you and so much to share with you."

"I've read your book," Shelley said. "The one you're about to publish. My goodness, Jeffy, you are brilliant. It's all so easy."

"Yes. They try to make it hard, and because of that, I've taken a long time to compose a set of detailed, scientific, complicated-as-possible manuals for the doctors and scientific community. And then I have the other set written in laymen's terms to teach the world. As people begin to put them into use, the light will come on and they will all realize just how easy it is."

"Things will take a while to change," Eric said. "But disease *will* come

to an end. We'll still need doctors for accidents, injuries, and for those who refuse to amend their ways, but eventually, the course of life will change."

"Exactly. It will be gradual, so I don't know why these people are trying to stop me. The economy will not crash. It will change. Change is good. I've listed in my manuals all the ways investments, companies, focuses can be switched to encompass the new directions."

"I'm so proud of you," Shelley said.

"Thanks Mom. So, where are you? It sounds like I heard a paging system in the background."

"Um, actually, we're at the hospital."

"Hospital? Why?"

"Now, don't go getting all worried, but, Ricky was shot in the leg."

"What? Ricky was shot? How?"

"With a gun, I surmise," Joey said.

Jeffy glared at him. "Shh."

Cam chuckled. Joey shrugged.

"The man who is trying to hurt you, he hosted a party last night. Ricky got caught raiding his hotel suite and a man shot him. It's not life threatening. Really, it's barely a scratch."

"If it was barely a scratch you wouldn't be at the hospital. Tell me the truth."

"Well, I don't want you to worry, but he was shot in his thigh, the bullet has been removed, minimal damage, he'll be okay."

Jeffy blew out a breath, shook her head. "I've lost all track of time. What time is it there?"

"It's noon. He was shot about seven last night. We were here when he came out of surgery. He's fine. They removed the bullet and repaired the muscle that was torn. Bree is in with him right now. They're gonna release him soon."

"I'm glad he's okay. I'm so sorry he was hurt. Tell him I love him. Tell everyone."

"I will, baby girl."

"So, I'll see you tomorrow at noon, right?"

"Yes, sweetie and that gives me just enough time to organize everyone at the house to help with a homecoming party."

"Everyone at the house?"

"Yeah. You won't believe who all is staying with us. We have a houseful. The Tanners, the Appels, the Stewarts, the Davises, and of course, everyone in our family."

Jeffy laughed out loud. "Oh, I'm so excited. I can't wait."

"Yes, you can," her father reiterated.

"Gotcha, Dad. Well, I guess I'd better let you go. I love you both so much."

"We love you too, Jeffy. See you soon, darling," Shelley said.

"Bye, baby girl," Eric added.

Jeffy ended the call. Smiling, she handed the phone to her brother. "Thank you, Joey."

He took the phone, rose, leaned over and kissed her cheek. "You're welcome."

Jeffy squirmed around on Cam's lap so that she could see his face. "And thank you, Cam."

"For what?"

"For bringing me home to my family. You kept promising you would and now, I'm on my way."

"You don't have to thank me."

She smiled at him, placed her hand on his cheek and looked into his eyes. Her smile turned into a frown. "You're sad."

He pulled her hand away. "Stop that."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. It just jumped out at me." Her brow creased. "I thought you could keep me out of your head."

"Yeah, me too. I guess I let myself open to you when you were crying a few minutes ago."

She sighed. "So, why are you so unhappy?"

"I'm not."

"Cam. Please be honest with me."

"I promise to always be honest with you, Jeffy. I'm not unhappy. I may be feeling a little, concerned."

"Concerned? About me?"

"About things between us changing once you get back into the arms of your family."

"Oh. Hmm, so you think I won't need you anymore?"

"Well, you make it seem rather silly, don't you? But yeah, I guess that's the simple way to put it."

She sat up, straddled his waist and placed her hands on either side of his face. "Cameron Wallace, I love you. I believe I will love you forever. If I didn't love you then your leaving me wouldn't have hurt me so badly or I would have at least gotten over it. I never got over it, Cam, because you have my heart."

He grabbed her hands, kissed both her palms and placed them over his heart. "Then marry me."

Her jaw dropped. Her eyes opened wide. "Wh, what?"

"Marry me, June Flower Kino."

"Cam, don't you think you're rushing it a little?"

"Maybe."

"I mean, we just got back together and life has been a little crazy. I haven't even made it home yet."

"Yeah, I get all that, still, you just said you love me and you will always love me, and I feel the same about you, so, to me marriage is the next logical step. Marry me."

Jeffy frowned, sighed. "I can't talk about this right now."

He blew out a breath and finally nodded his head. "I get it. Take all the time you need."

"Are you angry?"

"Nope."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"Try to understand where I'm coming from. I just need some time. Can you give me some time?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Always."

"The alternative would be to stop seeing you, and I don't want to be away from you anymore."

"That's a relief because I don't want to be away from you either." She stroked his furrowed brow. "Don't stress, Cam. Please. Don't let this change how we feel about each other. You came back to me and made me so happy. Don't pull back now."

"I'll be here for you, Jeffy. Now and always."

She leaned down and brushed her lips over his. He tangled his fist in her braid and deepened the kiss. Someone cleared their throat.

Jeffy and Cam broke apart, looking around the jet cabin. Eight hardened men smiled at them.

"I'd tell you to get a room," Joey said. "But like, there's not one to be had around here."

"They could go inside the john and become members of the mile high club," Jon Sweet suggested.

"Good grief, Jon," Jeff complained.

"Ya know that's my little sister," Joey added.

Jon shrugged with a smile. "Sorry. Just sayin'."

❁

Kimmie Lee knelt beside her friend on the dirty bed in the dirty apartment in New York City. "I don't care what you say, Marissa. You're gonna sober up enough to get on that plane. We're gonna clean you up, and

you're gonna be there when Jeffy and Cam get home tomorrow. And then, we're gonna do whatever it is we have to do to get you right."

"I don't want to see Jeffy or Cam. I don't want to see anyone. I just want you to leave me alone."

Kimmie looked over at Jensen. "Jensen, would you mind helping me to get her into the shower?"

"I'll do anything you need me to do," Jensen said. "Still, Kimmie, maybe you should give her sister a call."

"I thought about it, but Mickey is all worried about Jeff right now and is trying to take care of those two rowdy boys and I didn't want her to have to worry about Rissa too, at least, not until we get her back close enough for Mickey to do something about it."

"All her time iz taken up by my nephews," Marissa said, her words slurring badly. "Mickey duzzn't have any time for me."

"Oh, waa, waa, waa," Kimmie answered. "I will not buy into that 'woe is me' thing you got going on. All this is over that stupid guy. You will sober up and come home and if you have deeper issues you will get help. Now get yourself up and into the bathroom."

Marissa merely shook her head as tears ran down her face.

Kimmie motioned to Jensen to come over and help. Between the two of them they were able to get her into the shower. Kimmie began undressing Marissa and luckily, she didn't fight. Jensen left Kimmie to take care of that. Out in the bedroom, he took out his cell and checked in with Kimmie's dad.

"Yes sir. We found her, but she's a mess. It looks like she's been on a week-long binge. She's got some bruises on her face and legs. If I were a cop, the first thing I'd think is that she'd been beaten and raped, but Kimmie thinks this is all about her breaking up with some boyfriend. Only Marissa won't tell us anything about the guy other than he doesn't want her and he doesn't love her."

"Alright. Just get her home. We can't help her out there. She needs to be around people who love her."

"Will do."

"Keep them both safe."

"Yes sir. I got this."

"Thank you, Agent Deal."

"My pleasure, sir."

❁

"Excellent!"

"Excellent?" Payne Lanske questioned.

"Yes of course. She's safe now. Loksalle has been shut down, quite effectively I must say. Those Kinos, they don't do anything halfway."

"I think that honor would better go to Jason Lee and his Ameritech," Payne said.

Dr. Black nodded. "Yes, yes, whatever. Important thing is, she's on her way back to this country which puts her close by."

"And you think it will somehow now be easier to grab her than it was a year and a half ago?"

Dr. Black blew out a frustrated breath. "Payne, you have to learn to see the larger picture."

"I'm listening."

"She's on her way home. As you reported, the entire group, her family and friends, are leaving to meet her at Ameritech's private air strip, correct?"

"Yeah."

"I'm gonna need some of your best men, Payne. Ten, I think. And an all-terrain vehicle. And a nondescript van, white, with some company logo. And make ready our little dungeon area downstairs. We're gonna need to inflict some pain." He clapped his hands together in excitement. "And here we go."

"You haven't said how we're gonna pull this off."

"Sit down, Payne, and listen."



"If you think I'm gonna stay here just because my leg is a little sore, you're all out of your mind. I have crutches. I'm coming. Besides, they didn't say I couldn't walk on it. They said it would be best if I stayed off of it until the end of the week. That's a big difference."

Bree sighed at her husband. "Fine."

Shelley smiled at the two of them. "Ricky, of course, you're coming. We wouldn't dream of leaving you behind. You were so brave to get all that incriminating information from that computer and Jason says it may have been erased if you hadn't retrieved it when you did."

Ricky grinned at his wife. "See there. Your mom understands."

"Of course I do. Bree understands too," Shelley added, always the diplomat. "She's just worried about you. Surely you understand that, Ricky. Just think if she were the one hurt. You'd want to keep her all tucked in bed to make sure she healed properly."

"He'd want to keep her in bed, anyway," Mark mumbled, as Bella elbowed him in the side. "Ow!"

Ricky chuckled.

Shelley kissed Ricky's cheek. "Well, we all need to be leaving within the hour to get to the airstrip to meet Jeffy's plane and I have a guzillion more things to take care of, so you all run along and make sure everyone else is about ready to go."

"Mom," Bree began. "Why don't you leave it to the caterers?"

"Because it's all so last minute, I just want to make sure we didn't forget anything. Besides, we've arranged for the caterers to arrive about the time we get back."

"Why so late?"

"Because Eric and Jason don't want anyone here without security being present."

"And where's our security?"

"Well, I thought they should get to go meet the returning victors like everyone else. I didn't want them to be stuck here when we're not even here for them to protect."

Smiling Bree put her arms around her mother. "You never change, do you, Mom? You're always so kind and thoughtful. You know what? I love you."

"Aww," Shelley said, patting her daughter's cheek. "I love you too, sweetheart. Now, let me get to work." She glanced at her watch. "I have about fifty minutes."

"I'll help," Bree offered.

"Me too," Bella said, looking pointedly at Mark.

"Uh, me too," Mark added.

"Wonderful," Shelley said quickly. She pointed at Bree. "You find extra tablecloths and make sure they're clean. I loaned a bunch to the charity function last month and I never checked them out. Bella, if you will empty the dishwasher and then handwash those serving bowls, it would be a huge help. She grabbed Mark's arm. "And you come with me. I need someone strong."

Ricky smiled. His love for his wife and his mother-in-law/step-mother was so great, sometimes he just had to stand back and enjoy the feeling of his cup running over.

"What are you smiling at?" Eric asked as he entered the kitchen.

"Life."

Eric nodded. "Gotcha."

They both turned as the doorbell rang and then without waiting, the front door opened.

Eric went to see who'd come in.

"Kimmie?"

"Hey, Grandmaster Kino," Kimmie said.

Agent Jensen Deal came in behind her, moved forward, shook Eric's hand.

"Agent Deal," Eric said, "nice to see you."

Jensen moved aside and Eric saw who stood behind him. "Marissa!"

She moved slowly through the threshold. "Hi Grandmaster Kino."

He frowned. "Hello." He took her hand. "What's wrong, Marissa?"

She shrugged. "Not feeling too well."

"I went to pick her up in New York to bring her home to see Jeffy," Kimmie explained. "We just got in and I thought maybe you could fix her up before we have to go meet Jeffy. I also thought, well, you know who is staying here, and she might want to know what's up."

"I'm standing right here, Kimmie, so stop talking about me like I'm not here. And who is staying here?"

"Marissa!" Mickey said as she made her way down the stairs.

Marissa looked up at her sister, turned to glare at Kimmie, then turned back to her sister, feeling suddenly ashamed. "Hey, Mick."

Mickey came running down the stairs, grabbed the girl and hugged her to her breast. "Marissa! What an awesome surprise! I didn't know you were coming. I thought you told me you had an important engagement and couldn't make it back here."

Marissa hadn't wanted to see her sister. If Kimmie had told her Mickey was at the Kinos' house, she wouldn't have come.

"So?" Mickey said, smiling at her sister. "What happened?"

"I, uh, it fell through," Marissa said.

Mickey frowned. "Marissa, you look terrible. What's happened?"

"Maybe we should take this discussion into my study," Eric said. "Marissa, look at me."

She tilted her face up. He looked into her eyes, touched her head. "You're hung over." It wasn't a question. "I'll go make up a concoction in the kitchen and bring it to you. You and Mickey go to my study."

"I don't want to go any— "

"For me, Marissa," Eric cajoled. "Please, allow me to help you."

Marissa's eyes filled with tears. Silently she nodded and turned toward the study. Mickey glanced at Ricky who'd been standing in the kitchen doorway. "Will you make sure my boys are ready to go?"

Ricky nodded. "Got it covered."

Mickey turned toward the study. Kimmie started back too, but Eric stopped her. "You come with me."

Frowning, she followed Eric into the kitchen.

"We don't have a lot of time right now. You wanna fill me in quickly on what's going on?"

"Quickly. Okay. She got involved with a guy in New York, found out after the fact that he's married. He said he was leaving his wife. He didn't. Four days ago, he broke it off with Marissa but not before he let her know what a cheap, good-for-nothing slut he thought she was. She got mad and threw something at him. He got mad and roughed her up. That turned him on, so he had his way with her and then he left."

"Had his way with her? You mean he raped her?"

"Yeah, well, you and I may see it that way, but not according to Marissa. Anyway, by the time I got there, she'd been on a four-day drinking binge. I think she was taking some pills too. She kept saying she was just like her mother."

Eric sighed as he placed a cup of his famous herbal concoction on a tray. Marissa's mother had been in a mental facility and passed from pneumonia. She'd been addicted to prescription meds for many years. Some of that was bound to rub off on Marissa, who'd been given to her half-sister, Mickey, to raise when she was fifteen. Marissa had grown up beneath the shadow of her mother's addiction and illness. Some of those wounds had inevitably followed her into adulthood.

"I just couldn't let her be out there suffering all alone. So, Jensen accompanied me out to New York to bring her home."

"You, sweet girl, are a good friend, Kimmie," Eric said. "You've been that to both Marissa and Jeffy."

"Just fix her," Kimmie said. "I mean, you can, right?"

"With God, all things are possible," Eric assured her. He added some fruit and some protein to the tray and lifted it. "Tell my wife where I am."

Kimmie nodded. "Will do."

Ricky chatted quietly with Jensen, getting the details from him. They both decided that it would be best to be around when Jeff was told what had happened to his sister-in-law. They wouldn't put it past him to go hunt the man down.

"Come on," Ricky finally said. "I need help rounding up those Davis boys, the little hellions," Ricky mumbled.

Thirty minutes later, the huge crowd that occupied the Kino home was making their way out the front door to the two waiting limos Eric had hired to take the majority of the group, since there were so many out-of-towners who didn't have their own vehicles with them. The airstrip was about an hour's drive, depending on traffic. Kimmie and Jensen took Jensen's sports car. Bree drove Ricky in their SUV. Mark drove Bella, Breez, his own baby Emily, and Joey and Breez's girls, Sophia and baby Kelstyn. Eric and Shelley would take their own vehicle as well to make sure there was enough room for all those they were retrieving from the plane.

The Appels, the Tanners and Toby and Caroline Smith rode in one limo. Even though Chaz had rented a vehicle when they got into town, he, Lisa and Maddie chose to ride in the limo with their friends. In the other limo, it was mostly kids. Jacob Appel, young Eric, Taylor, JoJo, Logan, Laynah Stewart, and Gabriel Tanner, along with Mickey, Jeremy and Daniel Davis and last but not least, Marissa Daley, looking a little better than she'd been an hour before.

"Shelley, we need to leave, my love," Eric called as he headed to answer the knock at the front door.

Agent Carson, stood at the door. "I've pulled your car around for you, sir."

"Thank you, Greg," Eric said. "I appreciate it. You go ahead. We're right behind you. I just have to find my wife."

"Yes, well, I believe she was hanging lanterns out on the back deck on my last round."

"Lanterns," Eric laughed. "Of course."

"Would you like me to wait?"

"No, like I said, we're right behind you."

Eric watched as Agent Carson joined his partner, Agent Dawson, in their vehicle and sped toward the gate. Turning, he headed to the back deck.

"Sweetheart," he said from the dining room door. "I promise I'll do that when we get back."

She turned, sighed. "Okay. Is it time to leave?"

"Yes. Everyone else has gone."

"Oh! Are we late?"

"Not yet, but we need to get on the road."

She glanced around one more time. "It's just that I want everything to be perfect when she gets home."

"Her being home will make it perfect."

Shelley came to him, wrapped her arms around his waist. "Do you hear that?"

"What?"

"Silence."

"I thought you liked the ruckus of having everyone at the house."

"Oh, I do. I really love it, but I also remember when it's been just you and me."

He smiled. "The last time I remember it being just you and me was way back when I first met you and the boys were away with their father. I'll never forget that year."

"Me neither," Shelley said softly.

Eric bent and kissed her tenderly, then nuzzled her just below her ear.

"We could take some extra time right now and go upstairs," he offered. "I can drive fast."

"Are you speaking about the car or something else?"

Eric laughed, but looked into her eyes to see if she was serious about a quick fling, because if she was, he was absolutely willing to accommodate her. She must have read his question because she answered it with her next breath.

"Honey, I don't want to be late. Besides, I'm too old to be even considering this."

"Age is irrelevant, my love," Eric assured her. He looked her over. Other than her hair starting to show some streaks of gray, she didn't look any different than she'd ever looked. She had no wrinkles except for a few soft laugh lines in the corners of her eyes. Her large brown eyes were bright and youthful. She wore her thick, curly hair a little different now. It had been cut to just below shoulder length.

Today she wore a crisp yellow tailored blouse with white slacks and white tennis shoes. Casual and fresh, as usual, he thought. "Have I told you today," he continued, "that you look absolutely beautiful?"

"No, not today," she answered.

"Well, remind me to do that when we get back."

She giggled. "Will do."

His head jerked up as something caught his eye.

"What?"

He moved to the dining room door, looked out toward the beach. "I thought I saw something."

Shelley waited while he stood there another few minutes. "So?" she finally asked.

"I guess it was just sunlight flashing on the water. I'm gonna just check for a minute. You go ahead and get in the car. It's out front."

"Okay, but don't take too long."

He nodded. Shelley headed for the front door. Eric walked out on the deck, then down to the pool and looked south. Nothing. However, his sixth sense was going off big time. No more messing around. He needed to get Shelley away from here. He headed back in.

"I thought you were gonna get in the car," he said as she came toward him.

"I thought you said the car was out front," she said back, mimicking him playfully.

"What?"

"The car. It's not out front."

He grabbed her arm. "Baby, go downstairs into the weapons room.

Lock the door and call for help."

Her face paled. "Eric?"

"Too late for that," a male voice said as he came around the corner of the living room. Five men appeared just behind Shelley.

"Eric!" Shelley cried, pointing behind him.

Trapped. Eric spun into action. His elbow crashed into the face of the closest man behind him. When he turned he was surprised to see a total of five more. He fought, giving as good as he got. Meantime, Shelley too was fighting, doing her best to defend herself against the five men who'd apparently come through the front door.

Eric heard Shelley grunt as the man who'd spoken connected with her jaw. She landed on her back in the kitchen. Eric reached for her, hoping to place her at his back and defend her as long as he could, but he couldn't get to her.

He worked his way into the kitchen, hoping to be able to grab a knife. Spinning, he kicked the closest one to him in the head and the man went down. Eric lunged for the butcher block knives on the counter, pulled one and spun again. A man cried out, staggered back, holding his hand to his neck.

Eric tossed the knife back and forth in his hands, waiting for the next attacker, but before he could continue with his plan to kill them all if he had to, he heard a groan. Shelley slammed face down onto the kitchen floor and didn't move. The man who'd hit her pulled her head up by her hair and held a gun to her temple.

"I suggest you put the knife down if you want her to live."

When Eric hesitated, the man spoke again. "I only need one hostage. I don't mind killing her. Or you. Makes no difference to me."

Breathing hard, Eric slowly bent and set the knife on the floor.

"Good decision."

Someone kicked the back of Eric's leg and he fell to the floor. He allowed them to cuff him. He watched as one of the men hefted Shelley over his shoulder and headed out the dining room doors. Two more pulled him to his feet and led him out the same direction.

This is why the feeling of dread had been so strong. It wasn't about Jeffy or one of the other children. It was about Shelley and himself, he realized. And, he also realized this was not gonna be pleasant. His heart ached for what he knew his sweet wife was about to go through and for Jeffy, who'd waited so long to be reunited with her family. Damn.

✞✞✞

Genesis 28:15

"Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,

and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Chapter Twelve

"He told me to go on. He said he was right behind me," Agent Carson explained to his boss, Jason Lee.

Jason frowned as his mind went over the possibilities.

"Is there a problem?" Justin Lee asked as he joined his brother.

Jason eyed his elder brother. Justin was a champion worrier and Jason preferred to not tell him his concerns at this moment. But if he didn't tell him, Justin would worry anyway. Besides, Eric Kino had been Justin's best friend for the past forty-five years. Justin had a right to know. He sighed. "Eric and Shelley aren't here yet."

Justin eyed his watch. "What? Why? Did they leave the same time as everyone else?"

Agent Carson shook his head. "They were the last ones. They told me to go on. Mr. Kino said he would be right behind me."

"How long have you been here?" Justin asked, his voice rising in pitch as worry set in.

"Twenty minutes."

Justin took out his phone, called Eric's phone.

Jason waited patiently, even though Justin had to know that Jason had already tried to call him several times.

Justin frowned when it went to message.

"Have you— " Justin began.

"I've tried Shelley's phone too," Jason cut in. "I don't feel good about this."

"Hey, Jason, have you heard from Dad?" Ricky asked as he swung over on his crutches. Ricky looked from one brother to the other, to Agent Carson. His smile faded away. "What's going on?"

"Your father should've been here by now, that's what's going on," Justin said.

Ricky drew a calming breath. "Okay, who was the last to see him?"

"I was. They said they were right behind me."

"Did you actually see them leave the house?"

"No."

"Here they come," Breez cried out from her place by the window. She pointed at the approaching plane for Sophia's benefit. "Look, sweetie. Here comes Daddy."

After being distracted by Breez's words, Jason glanced out the large window then turned back to his conversation. "I've already called the local PD. I'm waiting for them to call me back once they get to the house and let me know what the situation is."

"Well, let's just pray they find everything in order. I mean, if I know Dad, he and Shelley took advantage of being alone and the time got away from them," Ricky said hopefully.

A few seconds later Jason got the call. They watched him as he spoke and knew it wasn't good. He finally hung up, looked up at his brother and Eric's son. "Both front and dining room doors were open. There are signs of a struggle. Broken dishes and lamps, furniture knocked over, signs of a struggle." He paused, drew a breath. "And there is a dead man on the kitchen floor. His throat has been slit."

Ricky cursed, then looked up. "Maybe it's not as bad as it looks. Maybe Dad won the battle and took off with Shelley."

"I don't think so," Jason continued. "There was a knife stuck through a piece of paper, lying on the counter. It said, 'Come and save them, Dr. Kino.'"

There was a large cheer from the other side of the room as the jet taxied to a halt and everyone ran out the door to greet the warriors returning home. Jason, Justin, Ricky and Agent Carson glanced out the window to see the jet door open and Joey appear to make sure the steps were secure. He then backed up and allowed Jeffy to precede him down the stairs.

While outside the large group converged on the tarmac, Jason spoke fiercely. "I'm heading back. Agent Carson, grab Dawson, Fillmore, White and Norton and come with me."

"Yes sir," Carson said as he went quickly to grab the others.

"Ricky, Justin, the two of you have the bad luck of filling everyone else in."

Ricky nodded.

"There you are!" Bree said from the doorway. "Come on, silly. You're the one who demanded to be here, bad leg and all. Hey," she said, looking around. "Where's Mom?"

Ricky frowned. "Gather everyone together for me, Bree. We have some bad news."

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Jason arrived at the Kino estate the same time as the FBI and merely watched as the feds cleared and turned away the catering company that Shelley usually employed.

The local police department who'd investigated originally seemed happy to turn the case over to the feds. Having consulted for and worked with the Bureau many times before, it was nothing new for Jason to go through the house with them now. Jason filled Special Agent Moore in on everything that had taken place with the Kinos over the past year and a half. Some of it Moore had known. Some he was surprised by.

They'd been discussing the possible directions the perps would take with this kidnapping, the whys and possible logistics when there was a commotion at the front door.

"I'm sorry ma'am, this is a crime scene."

"I don't care what it is," Jeffy said fiercely. "It's my home, they're my parents, and I'm coming in."

Jason headed for the door. He immediately waved off the goons. "It's okay. Let them in."

The majority of the crowd of family and friends stayed in their cars in the driveway. Yet, Jeffy, Ricky, Bree, Mark and Joey, along with Ameritech agents Keegan, Jeff and Cameron entered the crime scene.

Jason introduced them to Special Agent Moore and let him know that the last four worked for Ameritech and had just returned from the Kazakhstan/African mission.

Jeffy, trance-like, walked immediately toward the kitchen.

"I don't think you should—" Agent Moore began.

The others followed her. She stepped carefully around the workers, who were closing the body bag, put both her hands to her head and drew a sudden sharp breath.

"Daddy killed that man," she said as tears ran down her face.

"We're not sure what— "

She closed her eyes. "Oh, he *did*. He killed him. He cut him with a knife." She reached one finger out to point at the knife on the counter. "He cut him with *that* knife." Her hand ran over her own throat. "He was concerned about Mom, and— me. He was determined to kill them all if he had to, but there were so many. Five—no, ten."

She stepped backward, grabbed her stomach. "Mom is hurt. They punched her several times. She fought hard, but they hit her so many times that she got dizzy."

Bree sniffed as the tears ran down her face. Joey and Mark visibly

winced as they pictured their mother fighting for her life and Eric unable to protect her. Ricky stood still, his face a mask of calm.

"Mom lost consciousness," Jeffy continued as she dropped to her knees. "Here. She fell here. And Dad, he," she stopped, pressed her trembling hand to her mouth. "He's in such turmoil. His mind is racing a mile a minute, going over every option he has. He decides to surrender. If he doesn't they will kill Mom right here, right now. They told him to drop the knife and he put it down on the floor."

She stood, pointed toward the dining room doors. "They left through there." Moaning, she gripped her abdomen. Her knees collapsed, but Cam had been watching her closely and he rushed forward, catching her before she went down. He held her tightly against his chest, walked out to the living room and lowered her gently onto the couch.

Special Agent Moore stood in the kitchen, dumbfounded. "Is she for real? I mean, I've read the case files. I know she's considered psychic, but there was no big deal made about that."

"We try to play that down. She's had a hard time harnessing it," Ricky explained. "Sometimes she's precognitive. Sometimes she can feel, see or sense something that's happened in the past. She struggles with the integration of the messages. Sometimes they're clear and sometimes they make no sense to her."

"You say she has a hard time harnessing it? You mean she never knows when it will happen?"

He shrugged. "She can be psychic on purpose, if that's what you're asking, but she usually only does that if she's doing psychic exercises with Dad or if she's concerned about someone and she tries to read them. Most times, it just comes over her without her trying."

"Like now."

"Yeah, like now."

"How accurate is she?"

Ricky shrugged. "I've never known her to be wrong though she's had visions and dreams that she feels are precognitive that have never happened. At least not yet anyway. However, she usually does not focus on reading the past or future. Her main talent is being able to connect with a patient's mind and help them to heal. That's where she focuses her abilities. Which, I suppose, is why she's made the medical discoveries she's made."

"Because she can look inside and diagnose a patient?"

"Not just diagnose. She, sort of, joins with them and uses her mind to help them to heal."

"And you believe she can actually heal, like some spiritual healer?"

"Look, I don't care if you believe me. I know she can use her psychic

ability to figure out what's ailing a person and somehow communicate subconsciously with them and with God to help them to heal or she can see the best path to take to heal them. She once told me sometimes that it's like a book opens in her mind and shows her the cure. It also shows her the prevention. My sister, Special Agent Moore, is an amazing young lady."

"Which is why we need to keep her safe," Jason added. He glanced at Ricky. "I don't want her left alone for a minute."

Special Agent Moore nodded. "That would be advisable. We can—"

"I have it covered," Jason said quickly.

"Fine. I doubt the perps will try to get to her with the entire family around her."

"That's not what I'm worried about. If I know Jeffy, she will try to go out and find her parents," Jason said.

Jason watched the agent's face and knew what he was thinking. He was thinking of allowing Jeffy to do just that. He was thinking about using her to set a trap for the perps. However, as far as Jason was concerned, it was too risky to send her out. Besides, there was no guarantee that if Jeffy gave herself up they would take her to where they're holding Eric and Shelley.

Ricky watched this exchange. He too, knew what they each were thinking. Yet he had his own ideas. Turning, he went to the living room where Bree, Mark and Joey had joined Jeffy and Cam. Ricky strode up to Jeffy and knelt down in front of her and took her hand firmly in his and spoke softly.

"I swear to you, Jeffy, I'll do everything and anything it takes to get them back. We'll leave no stone unturned. We'll consider every single course of action. We will not sit idly by in fear, hoping and waiting."

Jeffy sat up straighter, realizing what that meant.

Ricky looked around to make sure only their family was in earshot.

"We are a family of warriors. Every single one of us. Warriors do not sit by and let the FBI do their work. We will do what we have to do. That's the way I feel anyway."

"We all feel that way," Joey piped in.

"Whatever it takes," Mark stated firmly.

"Bree?" Ricky asked.

"I'm hardly a warrior, but I'm with you. Whatever it takes."

"Whatever rules we need to break," Ricky added.

"Absolutely," Joey murmured.

"Cam?" Jeffy asked.

"No matter what happens, I'll be by your side and I'll die defending you and your family."

"Our family," Joey corrected. "You're part of it."

Cam nodded, not wanting to let them know that Jeffy had refused to marry him.

"What exactly are we talking about doing?" Bree asked.

"Obviously, until we hear from the bad guys, there's nothing we can do," Mark said.

Ricky nodded. "But once we hear from them, we'll move. They want Jeffy. The Feds might want her to wear a wire and meet with the kidnappers. Jason, on the other hand, will not want her to be involved in any way."

"I'll meet with the kidnappers," Jeffy said. "I want to help and I'm not afraid."

"I get that," Ricky said. "What I'm saying is, we won't depend on the Feds or Jason to make our decisions or to keep Jeffy safe. Once we hear from the kidnappers, we'll make our own plan. If we decide to send Jeffy in, we'll be with her the entire way. We'll keep her safe, we'll follow and we'll get Dad and Shelley back."

"Making pacts with the devil, are we?" Keegan said as he entered the room and approached the group.

Ricky stood, his eyes meeting the other man's.

"Cool your jets, Kino," Keegan said quietly. "I'm in."

"Okay, and I'd prefer you not use that terminology. Because we're always on God's side."

"And I'm in too," Jeff said as he came around the corner. "Not that I heard anything else, but if you think I'm gonna sit by and let you guys do anything on your own without me, then think again."

"Jason needs to remain out of the loop," Joey said. "To protect the integrity of Ameritech. Right now, Ameritech works closely with other law enforcement agencies. If we become known as a loose cannon, they'll refuse to work with us."

They all nodded in agreement to help Jason have plausible deniability by keeping him out of their plans.

"We're gonna need more men," Keegan offered. "Tristan, Brayden and Kaleb will want in. They thrive on breaking the rules."

Ricky nodded. "Okay. No more talk for now. Wait until we're sure we're alone. Tell your families whatever you feel is right. Worry them. Don't worry them. You each know them best."

"JoJo and Logan are gonna want to help," Mark said.

"So is Eric," Ricky agreed.

"And don't forget John and Jacob Appel," Keegan added.

"Until later tonight then," Ricky said. "Everyone is bunking down at my house until they clear the crime scene here. Speak with your families, take

care of any business and meet back together tonight in my kitchen."

❁

Eric's eyes opened slowly. The past hours had been a blur and he had no idea how much time had passed since he and Shelley had been taken. They'd ridden in an ATV along the beach several miles before they transferred to a white van with a beach umbrella logo on it.

Once in the van, Shelley came out of her semi-conscious stupor, much to Eric's relief. However, Eric's relief was short-lived as their abductors then produced a hypodermic needle. Shelley tried to fight them off. It was difficult to watch as two men held her down and a third injected her with a substance that put her under almost immediately. Eric had been able to get her attention and keep eye contact with her as she lost consciousness.

He'd been next. He had no idea of the day or time. As far as he knew, they could've kept them out for days, even though he doubted that as they would've needed water at the very least. He'd awoken as the van was coming to a halt. It was dark outside, but he thought he saw the outline of a mountain against the night sky through the back window of the van.

Sensing that they would soon be leaving the van, Eric scooted closer to Shelley. One of the men turned at his motion.

"He's awake?" another man asked.

"Yeah, he's awake."

"Take care of that."

There was a quick, blurred motion. Sharp pain. And that was the last thing Eric remembered until now. He reached behind his head and was grateful that his fingers came back with only a minuscule amount of blood. Pushing himself up to a sitting position, he scanned the room. His eyes fell on Shelley lying on a small gurney-type bed pushed against the wall opposite the door. He made his way to her side, eased down onto the gurney and pulled her into his arms, leaning close to listen for her breathing.

"Shelley," he said softly. "Baby, can you hear me?"

She moaned and he caressed her cheek. "Come on, sweetie. Wake up. Can you hear me?"

Her eyes blinked open. "Eric?" she asked, her voice gravelly.

"Yes, baby. It's me."

"Where are we?"

"In some room. Pretty state of the art. I'm sure we're on camera and probably mic'd. There are no windows and one obvious door, which I assume is locked."

She smiled. "Do me a favor and make sure."

He smiled back. "I promise. How do you feel?"

"I have a headache and my body hurts all over, but I think I'm okay. How about you?"

"Ditto on the headache."

"Help me sit up," she said.

He moved to sit beside her on the cot and pulled her up to sit next to him. "How's that?"

She nodded, raised her head, looked around the room.

The gray walls seemed to be made of some kind of metal because there were rivets visible at certain intervals. Lighting consisted of several recessed lamps. There was a small panel on the wall near the door with a keypad on it. Other than the gurney they sat on, there was no furniture. The floor seemed to be made of concrete and was also a solid gray.

Shelley looked up at Eric, frowning.

"What?" he asked.

"I just realized that you said there was one *obvious* door. What exactly does that mean?"

Eric pointed to hardly noticeable separations in the walls on both sides. "Look very closely. Those panels there look like they may open."

"Open to what?"

"Now, that's the million dollar question, isn't it?"

"Hidden panels, secret rooms, it's like something— "

"Shelley," Eric interrupted. "Listen to me, sweetheart, because we may not have much time." He leaned close, spoke softly against her ear so that it would be difficult for a microphone to pick up his words. "You realize that the reason they took us is to get to Jeffy?"

Shelley nodded.

"They want to make her come to them and they think they can do that by giving her the opportunity to save us. And if I know Jeffy, she will try," he whispered.

"But Jason wouldn't let her, would he? Nor Cam. Nor her brothers and sister," she whispered back.

"Jeffy's a smart girl and she will be able to get past Jason and Cam, not that I think she'll have to get past Cam. He'll help her in anything she wants him to. As far as her brothers and sister, I believe they will be in league with her. Anyway, the thing is, if Jeffy doesn't respond quickly, these guys are probably gonna do things that will make her move faster."

Shelley frowned. "I'm not following you."

"Sweetheart, they probably plan to," he blew out a breath, "to make us suffer."

Shelley blinked slowly and then her body shuddered. "You mean they're gonna torture us?"

"Well, torture might be a bit extreme. I'm not sure if they'll simply rough us up a bit, or go to more elaborate lengths. I'm not trying to frighten you, sweetie. I'm telling you this so you'll be prepared."

"They won't be able to get to me. Never again."

"I understand where you're coming from, but if you act too brave or like what they do doesn't affect you, they may test you further."

"I get what you're saying, Eric, but I swore I would never let anyone get to me again like James Crane did. I won't act brave, mostly because I'm not feeling too brave, still, I will not let them break me. I'm telling you this so you won't worry about me. They can't get to my mind. I won't let them. I'm okay."

He stroked his hand over her hair. "I'm proud of you, baby." His eyes bore into hers. "I'm sorry, Shelley."

"For what, my love?"

"For not being able to protect you."

"You've trained me and prepared me to the best of your ability. That is how you've protected me. Now promise me you'll let those thoughts go."

He sighed. "I promise. Now get ready because they won't like the fact that we're whispering and they can't hear what we're saying."

As if on cue, the door burst open. Startled, Shelley jumped then turned to her husband with a smile. "You're so smart."

He tried to smile, but it came across as a grimace mostly because all three men had their weapons drawn.

"Get up," one ordered, using his gun to gesture towards Eric.

Eric rose. Two men holstered their guns, grabbed him, shoved him across the room, while a third punched some numbers on the keypad by the door and the small panel opened, producing several illuminated buttons. He punched one and suddenly, the hidden door in the wall to Shelley's left whooshed open, receding into the wall.

Shelley peered inside the small space, no bigger than a closet and her eyes opened wide. There were four large cuffs attached to the wall, two higher and two at a level near the floor, obviously for arms and legs.

Eric was pushed up against the wall, his wrists placed in the arm holds. The man operating the keypad pushed another button inside the panel and the cuffs locked around Eric's wrists. That same man smiled and moved forward.

He opened a metal cabinet built into the wall next to where Eric was bound. Shelley gasped. An array of weapons came into view. Knives, metal rods, whips, even something that looked like dental instruments. It looked like a scene out of a "B" horror movie.

The man lifted a large hunting knife from its cradle and turned toward

Eric, testing the knife's blade with his thumb. "Name's Payne," the man said. "Thought you might like to know, since I'm gonna get to know you intimately over the next few days."



"There she is," Kimmie said.

Kimmie and Marissa made their way to the front of the small theater room where Jeffy was curled up with her laptop. Ricky's and Bree's home didn't have quite as many bedrooms as the Kino manse, but it did offer a tremendous amount of hiding places, the home theater room being one. After she'd tried to eat some dinner the group had thrown together, Jeffy had snuck off to try to lose herself in her work and had been madly at work on the computer when her friends found her.

She looked up, gave a semblance of a smile.

"You okay?" Kimmie asked.

"I'm fine," Jeffy answered. "Just waiting."

"I thought you would've heard something by now," Marissa said.

Jeffy sighed, glanced at the computer clock. 11:10 p.m. "It's only been twelve hours. It may take a couple of days before they actually try to contact us."

"I remember when Mickey first went missing," Marissa said, taking a seat next to Jeffy. "Those first twenty-four hours were terrible. We kept waiting and waiting for a ransom note, but there never was one, because–well, you know."

Jeffy closed the laptop, smiled up at her friends. "I knew you were suffering, Marissa. Mickey told me she was worried about you. That's why I snuck up to Seattle to see you."

"I'm glad you did," Marissa said. "When you told me Mickey was alive, I felt I could finally breathe again. And if you hadn't come up there, I never would've met you, and you and Cam would never have gotten together."

Jeffy smiled at the thought of her and Cam's first day together. She hadn't even known him five hours when she'd asked him to have sex with her just so she could have the experience. It was Cam who'd been mature enough to realize Jeffy wasn't ready for that.

"I was so mad at you," Kimmie said. "You snuck up to Seattle and didn't even tell me."

"Sorry, Kimmie. I suppose I should've told you, but there was just no time." Jeffy smiled at her. "You know, I gotta say, you've always been such a good friend."

Kimmie smiled. "I think it's ingrained in me. Mom is a good friend to your mom. Dad is a good friend to your dad. Of course I would be a friend

to you."

"I mean, you've gone above and beyond. You still liked me when nobody else could stand to be around me."

"I think you're too hard on yourself," Marissa said.

"Maybe," Jeffy conceded quickly, simply because she just didn't feel like arguing.

"Anyway, Jeffy," Kimmie said. "We didn't mean to interrupt you, but Dad has asked me to come home tonight and I wanted to say goodbye and tell you that I believe that somehow, someway, everything will turn out right."

Kimmie hugged Jeffy and pulled away. Jeffy's eyes moved to Marissa, looked her over. "So, what's going on with you, Rissa?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry, but I'm picking up extreme sadness."

Marissa lifted her chin. "Guess I'm just worried about your parents. After all, they're like parents to me, too. I mean, only a few minutes before your dad— " She stopped.

Jeffy raised her brows. "What? What's going on? A few minutes before my dad what?"

"Spill it," Kimmie said.

Marissa blew out a breath. "I was gonna say, I had a session with your dad just a few minutes before we left to go meet your plane."

"A session with my dad? Go on," Jeffy prodded.

"He's always been so kind to me. He always told me I could come to him about anything, but I didn't. And I should have."

"Did something happen to you? Is that why you've been so inaccessible?"

"I, uh, I fell in love with someone."

"That's wonderful!"

"No. It wasn't. He was married."

"You had an affair with a married man?"

"I didn't know he was married until we'd been dating for a while. By the time he told me, I was already head over heels."

"Oh, Marissa– sweetie."

"So lover-boy tells her he's gonna leave his wife. Everything at home is so bad. Yadda, yadda, yadda," Kimmie said impatiently.

"Long story short," Marissa continued. "He dumped me, and when he did, I got into a fight with him."

"A fight?"

"Yeah. I was just so mad and hurt. I went a little crazy. Kind of like how my sister did to my father. Only Jeff wasn't there to protect me like he

was for Mickey and Weston beat the crap out of me."

Jeffy shook her head.

"And he raped her," Kimmie put in.

"It wasn't rape. It was like, one for the road."

"Geez, Marissa, what am I gonna do with you? If he takes you against your will it's rape, pure and simple," Kimmie argued.

Jeffy took Marissa's hand. "I understand, sweetie. It may not seem like quite the same trauma as being raped by a stranger, but it's still the same act, an act of violence against your person."

Marissa's eyes filled with tears.

"Anyway," Kimmie said. "Marissa decided to drown all her sorrows in bourbon."

"Bourbon and coke," Marissa corrected.

"Coke?" Jeffy shrieked.

"Coca-cola," Marissa said defensively.

"For the first two days it may have been bourbon and coke. After that it was straight bourbon," Kimmie insisted. "And don't forget the Prozac."

"It was Paxil."

"Whatever."

"Kimmie," Jeffy said softly. "You sound like you're angry."

"Maybe I am," Kimmie admitted. "I mean, geez, I have two really good friends in the whole world and one was on the other side of the world with vicious killers trying to blow her up and the other was on the other side of the country trying to kill herself."

"I wasn't trying to kill myself. I wouldn't do that."

"Well, you came pretty close for not even trying."

"Okay, stop," Jeffy said loudly. She smiled. "It's obvious the two of you really love each other. I'm glad you do. I'm looking forward to having you both as lifelong friends." Jeffy rose from her chair. She was glad to have something to work on to distract her from thinking about her parents. She moved forward, sat on the floor and patted the spaces beside her. "Come sit."

Intrigued, Kimmie and Marissa sat in a small circle. Jeffy held out her hands and the three clasped hands.

"Will you allow me to pray with you?" Jeffy asked. "And I'd like to do a healing meditation with you."

"Don't you think you have much more important things to worry about right now?" Kimmie asked.

"Please," Jeffy said. "It will give me something else to focus on for a few minutes. I really need the distraction."

The girls finally conceded, nodding their heads at their friend whom

they trusted completely.

"Close your eyes," Jeffy said quietly. "Dear Father— "

When Jeffy didn't go on, Kimmie looked up. Tears streamed down Jeffy's face. Before Kimmie could object, Jeffy finally spoke.

"Father, it's a difficult time right now, I'm sure You know since our whole family is probably inundating You with calls. Still, if You wouldn't mind helping us here with Marissa. She's struggling, Father. She's feeling lost and a little confused and she could sure use Your light in her heart right now. Bless her with peace Father. She's done some things that she's truly sorry about, but she knows You'll forgive her and give her strength and heal her heart. Father, I won't keep You long cuz I know You're busy, but let me just tell You how grateful I am for these two beautiful and strong warriors who are so honorable and the truest friends a girl could have. Bless them and heal them in any way You see fit, for I know You know their hearts. We pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, Yeshua HaMashiach, Amen.

"Amen," the other two girls whispered.

"Now, concentrate on your breathing."

Neither girl was a stranger to meditation and did as instructed.

Jeffy began to probe with her mind, finding mostly sadness and pain in Marissa and mostly strength in Kimmie, which made sense. Marissa's father had abused her elder sister, even tried to kill her off and had shown no regard for Marissa either. Her mother had stood by his side in everything while in a drug induced stupor for the majority of Marissa's life. Her mother ended up trying to take her own life and died in a mental health facility. On the other hand, Kimmie was the daughter of two, well-adjusted, happily married people who both were warriors for justice and deeply spiritual.

Jeffy opened her heart, giving comfort and love and feelings of self-worth to Marissa and love and understanding to Kimmie. She went on for several minutes and began to feel lightheaded. The meditation abruptly ended when Jeffy fell backward, her head hitting the carpet with a soft thud.

"Jeffy?" Kimmie said, bending over her.

When she didn't answer, Marissa jumped up. "I'll get help."

Seconds later, Cameron and Ricky rushed into the room. Cam took her pulse and Ricky checked her pupils, which were dilated.

Ricky scooped her up and carried her to the front of the house, calling for Lori, Justin Lee's wife who'd been a trauma nurse.

Justin and Lori came running as did everyone else.

A crowd gathered around as Lori checked Jeffy over and Kimmie told of the meditation they'd been doing.

Lizzy Tanner placed a cool cloth on Jeffy's head.

"Talk to me, Jeffy," Lori demanded in a firm, but loving tone.

Jeffy stirred. "I just need energy," she whispered.

Ricky bent his head to her. "Energy?"

"Yes," Jeffy said. "I tried to heal Marissa's heart. I was too drained."

"Both physically and emotionally," Ricky chided.

"Energy?" Jodi Appel said quickly. "Got that. I can do energy. First, Miss Maddie, would you mind making her up some kind of a little energy snack?"

"Not at all, dear," Maddie said, scurrying off to the kitchen.

"Everyone else make a circle around Jeffy," Jodi ordered. "If you can touch her, do it. Or touch someone who's touching her. Imagine the beautiful white light of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ coming to you from His hand, through the crown of your head, and into your heart. Now, from your heart, down your arm and out your fingertips and into Jeffy. Because your mind is powerful and if you can see it in your mind's eye it is indeed happening."

The crowd of over thirty people did as instructed, even those who weren't avid meditators. Young Eric, Logan and JoJo were big-time believers after they'd done a prayer and meditation once that brought what they believed to be their deceased loved ones to visit them.

The group listened as Jodi talked them through the meditation, asking for the light of the love of Jesus, the light of God, to fill them and surround them.

The meditation continued for several minutes until they heard Jeffy whisper something. "Dad," she said softly.

She sat up quickly.

"What is it, hon?" Bree asked.

"I, I could see Dad. Just for a second. He's alive. I know it. And so is Mom. I couldn't see her, but I could feel her. She's in pain. And there is blood."

A murmur rose from the group.

"Could you see where they are? Anything at all that might help us to locate them?" Ricky asked.

"A room. They were in a room. It was all gray. There were other people there but they were dark. In shadow. There was a wall with knives and things. It was weird. It looked like the weapons were floating in the air next to the wall. One floated in front of Dad, but he isn't afraid. He's standing, his hands are raised. I think he's attached to the wall."

Jeff cursed softly and began pacing the room. Mickey tried to sniff back her tears. The picture Jeffy painted was horrifying to think about.

Jeffy shook her head. "I'm sorry. That's all I can see."

Ricky nodded.

"How are you feeling now, Jeffy?" Cam asked, leaning over her.

"I'm fine. Just tired. Very tired."

"Of course she is, bless her heart," Caroline said. "All of you that came in on that plane have to be exhausted."

Ricky looked them over, then looked to Bree, who'd been emotionally incapacitated since they'd discovered their parents missing. He started to whip out some orders when Lisa Stewart stepped in.

"Bree?" Lisa asked. "So, how many bedrooms are there here?"

Bree shook her head as if coming out of a daze. "Um, nine upstairs. Mine and Ricky's is here on the main level along with one more, so that's ten altogether." She stood, wringing her hands and looking around as if she couldn't decide what to do first. "I haven't been much of a hostess."

"Nonsense. Your family is in jeopardy. We don't expect you to play hostess. We're not here so you can take care of us. We're all here to show support for you and your family and because we want Eric and Shelley back as much as everyone. So, if you don't mind, being in the hotel business, Jodi and I sort of have a knack for this type of thing. Mind if we step in and get everyone situated for the night?"

Bree's eyes filled. "I would very much appreciate that. There's extra linens in the uh— "

"We'll find everything we need and for what we don't find, we can hit up the local Wallyword."

Ricky held his hand up. "Everyone, would you mind if I say something?"

"Not at all," Justin said. "In your parents' absence, *you* are the head of the Kino family."

Ricky shook his head. "YOU, are the eldest and my father's best fr..."

"YOU are the head of the Kino family," Justin said again.

Ricky sighed, nodded, drew a deep breath. "Okay, well, those are some giant shoes to fill," he muttered. "Anyway, I just wanted to thank you all. For everything. For your love and support. For those of you who risked your lives to bring Jeffy home. For Toby and Caroline, laymen who willingly participated in helping catch Loksalle. And for everyone sticking around now that our family is visited by another test. Some of you have been our friends for longer than I've been alive. Some of you we've known only a few years but I'm grateful to all of you and amazed at the love each of you have directed towards our family and I just wanted to say thanks."

Bree, Mark, Joey and Jeffy all nodded in agreement.

"Hey, no problem," Keegan answered. "You guys were all there for me

and my family when it really mattered. I'm happy to pay it back. And by tomorrow there will be three more because Heather, Rose and Violet are flying in to show their support."

"Make that five more, because Grace and Brody are also flying in tomorrow," Toby announced.

Eyes moist, Ricky placed his hand over his heart, tapped twice. "Thank you." He then brought his hands together and bowed slowly.

❁

Eric stared obstinately at the man named Payne. He was definitely not intimidated by him or the large knife Payne threatened him with.

Shelley tried to rise, but was pushed back down onto the gurney.

Payne moved forward, pulled out the front of Eric's white, blood-spattered polo shirt, inserted the knife in the placket just below the small row of buttons and ripped the shirt in two. He then cut the sleeves open and jerked what was left of the shirt off Eric and tossed it to the floor.

Stepping back, Payne eyed the man, assessing, calculating. If not for the slight graying hair at the temples, he could almost believe he'd captured the wrong Kino. This man did not appear to be elderly in any way, yet his dossier says he is sixty-six. His fighting skills had been pretty amazing. Payne had no doubt that had the elderly Kino not been convinced to surrender, he would've succeeded in taking out several more of Payne's men.

Eric watched the man carefully, learning all he could from facial expressions and mannerisms. The man was definitely ex-military. He was also damaged goods. The tic just under the eye, the licking of the lips. This man had been traumatized in some way. He'd sold out and now was a hired killer. He's killed before and he got off on pain, his own as well as others. These were Eric's first impressions and assumptions.

Payne moved forward again, placing the flat of his hand on Eric's chest, while looking into Eric's eyes.

Eric's next conjecture was that the man was gay or had gay tendencies. Eric had always lived by the 'live and let live' rule. Not that he condoned sin. He did not. And he did not compromise with evil. However, he didn't judge. He did teach and try to correct because telling the truth to people is showing love. In the end though, what other people chose to do was between them and God. The only reason this observation was important is because homosexuality is a sin, and accepting sin consciously into one's life leads to very deep emotional problems including anger and violence. Regardless of the fact that the homosexual tendencies probably had something to do with whatever traumas this Payne person had suffered, all

that meant to Eric was understanding what made him tick, and what his vulnerabilities were, because Eric would use those vulnerabilities if he could, to gain his and Shelley's freedom.

Payne smiled as he moved his hand down, stroked Eric's stomach muscles and hooked his fingers in the waistband of his pants. "You're gonna wish you were dead by the time I get through with you," Payne promised, with a gleam in his eyes.

Eric only shrugged. "You think to defile me? You cannot. It's impossible. You will only be exasperating yourself."

Payne jerked his hand away as if he'd been caught in the cookie jar. His eyes narrowed in anger. He moved very close, placing the blade of the knife against Eric's cheek. "Not you," he said with a laugh. "Did you think I meant you?" He pointed toward Shelley. "I bet your old lady there would be good for some fun." He smiled at the narrowing of Eric's eyes. "Still, here's something to think about."

He whisked the knife down Eric's jaw, opening a slit about two inches long. Turning abruptly, he motioned toward Shelley. The other two men jerked her to her feet. Payne moved quickly, grabbed her yellow blouse and tore it from her body.

"You can't hurt me," Shelley screamed at him, kicking her leg out at him and connecting with his knee, taking pleasure in his soft grunt. "You can't hurt me," she repeated. "Nothing you do can hurt me. It's just a body. Do you hear me? It's just a body. Do what you want but you can't touch my mind. You'll never make any kind of impression on me. You're nothing. Nothing," she spewed.

He back-handed her and she flew backward, tripping over the cot and falling beside it. The men picked her back up and Payne punched her in the stomach.

Shelley doubled over, gasping for breath. Eric decided there will be no mercy for the man when the time comes. He stood just out of reach of Eric's legs. They hadn't bothered to secure his legs to the wall. They underestimated him because of his age. A mistake. If Payne would just back up a few inches, Eric would wrap his legs around his neck and snap it.

Shelley was lifted again and Payne drew close, fisted his hand in her hair. "I'm gonna enjoy doing you," he whispered.

"I very much doubt that," she spat back.

He placed his mouth over hers which was a big mistake. Shelley bit down. He screamed and tried to pull away but Shelley wouldn't let go. She had his lower lip caught between her teeth.

She would've ripped it off had the man behind her not pushed a blade against her throat.

"Let him go or I'll kill you now," the man threatened.

Shelley let go, and Payne stumbled back, holding his hand to his bleeding mouth. He stood straight, tried to collect himself while his men beat Shelley to unconsciousness. Payne then turned to Eric. "You'll both pay for that. Once your kid shows up and Black has what he wants, I'm gonna have my way with the both of you."

"Black?" Eric asked.

"Did you think it was me who wanted your daughter?" Payne said with a chuckle, holding his hand in front of his bleeding mouth. "Dr. Julian Black. Once he gets through with your kid, she'll never be the same. If she lives."

Turning abruptly, he moved toward the door. "Take the pictures," he ordered. He waited while one of his men clicked off several photos. Once the others walked out, Payne hit the button to release Eric. Eric stumbled away from the wall and flew to Shelley's side.

Payne then pushed another button and the door to the mini torture chamber slid closed, leaving nothing but smooth metal exposed. Another button later, a door on the opposite side of the room slid open. Payne closed the box and exited, the heavy door sliding shut solidly.

Eric knelt over Shelley's body, touched her face gently and was relieved when she immediately opened her eyes.

"I thought they might stop if I played dead," she explained.

He smiled at her. "Smart. You did good."

"Do you think I went a little too far in what I said?"

He did, but he wouldn't say that to her now. "I think you're perfect. You're so strong, Shelley girl. I'm proud of you."

He tried to smile at her, but the blood running from her nose and her bruised, swollen face kept him from it. It broke his heart, to see this woman, his wife, his love, in this condition, again. Yet, she'd learned her lesson well all those years ago. She was definitely no victim.

The men who'd beaten her had no idea who she was. They didn't know she was an angel come to Earth. They didn't know that had she encountered them on the street and they'd asked for assistance, she would've taken them in, fed them, clothed them, sheltered them. And if he knew Shelley, they had no idea that she's probably already forgiven them. For himself, he would have to work at that.

"What is that door he opened over there?" Shelley asked weakly.

"It appears to be a bathroom. Wanna check it out?"

"Oh, that would be lovely," she murmured. "Do you think you could help me up? I feel a little dizzy."

"Yes, Shelley, I think I can help you."

She raised her hand, touched his cheek. "You're bleeding."

He smiled. "So are you."



The entire front of the theater room was now covered in wall to wall air mattresses with tiny gaps in between to allow for foot traffic. This room had been assigned to the teenagers. Nine bedrooms upstairs were now occupied. Jeff, and Mickey in one. Joey, Breez and their two girls in the second. In the third was Mark, Bella and baby Em. Keegan and Lizzy occupied number four while Lisa, Chaz and Aralyn were in five. The sixth held Toby and Caroline and the seventh housed the younger boys, Charlie and Matt Stewart and Daniel and Jeremy Davis. Justin and Lori occupied the eighth and Marissa Daley held the final upstairs bedroom.

Ricky and Bree took their own room downstairs and Maddie Lewis was given the other downstairs bedroom in deference to her age. John and Jodi Appel camped out in the den while Jeffy and Cameron had an air mattress in Ricky's office.

Even though it was after midnight, the only one in the theater room presently asleep was Gabriel Tanner.

The twins, Lily and Daisy, sat together on the mattress they would share, whispering softly. Logan lay on his stomach on his mattress, his head propped in his hands, listening to JoJo and Laynah who sat in the front row of the theater seats, swapping life stories. Taylor lay on her mattress, staring at the ceiling.

Jacob Appel and young Eric Kino sat on the edge of the small stage, discussing the military and the controversial space program. All the conversations taking place were simply a cover to keep from voicing their fears.

Brow furrowed, young Eric looked around when he thought he heard someone crying. His and Jake's conversation halted and he scanned the room for the source. Excusing himself, he headed toward the mattress on the other side of his and eased down on it.

"Hey, sis," he said softly. "You okay?"

Taylor sat up, unable to stop the tears that ran down her face. "I, I can't stand it, Eric. I can't stand the thought of something happening to Grandma and Granddad. I've been lying here trying to pray and envision good things, but I'm so afraid. So afraid that we'll never see them again."

"Oh, come on now, sis," Eric said, putting his arm around her.

He held her for a few minutes before she spoke again.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what?"

"Aren't you gonna tell me everything is gonna be okay?"

He sighed. "I want to. I wish I could, but I just don't know. Guess I'm not very good at filling Dad's shoes, huh?" He stood, pulled her up. "Come on, maybe Mom and Dad can give us a little more information to take away some of that worry."

Tugging on his sister's hand, he led her to their parents' bedroom and knocked on the door.

"Yeah, come in," Ricky called.

Eric opened the door. Apparently, his mother and sister were on the same wavelength because his mom's face was all red and swollen from crying and his dad was standing next to her, a hand on her shoulder.

"Uh, sorry, to interrupt," Eric said.

Ricky motioned them in. "Problems?"

Eric nodded. "Taylor is having a hard time and I wasn't quite sure what to say."

His mouth taut, Ricky nodded at his son, patted the bed next to his wife. "Come sit down, Taylor."

Sighing dramatically, Taylor moved forward and sat down next to her mother. Sniffing back her own tears, Bree put her arm around Taylor's shoulders.

Ricky knelt down in front of his daughter. "You wanna talk about it, baby girl?"

"I can't stop thinking about what Grandma and Granddad must be going through. Are they hurt? Are they hungry or thirsty? Are they cold?" Her eyes welled with tears. "Do they think this is the end? Do they think they'll never see us again? Are they worried or scared?"

Bree's tears began anew and she hugged Taylor harder.

Ricky drew a breath. "Okay, baby girl, I understand. First, I have to say, I think your thoughts are very grown-up. The questions you just asked are more like what a parent might think if their child were to go missing. It's hard to believe they're the worries of a thirteen-year-old."

She shrugged. "It's just the thoughts that popped into my head."

"They are very empathic and give evidence of the immense love that's in your heart." He cupped her face. "I'm proud of you, sweetie. Now, secondly, Dad and Shelley might be cold or hungry, but you have to know that wouldn't bother them very much at all. They would scoff at being a little uncomfortable. You know that, right?"

Wiping at her tears, Taylor nodded.

"And they might be hurt," Ricky continued, "but you have to know that even that wouldn't bother them too much. Still, I understand that you would be concerned about the physical things. However, Taylor, the most

important thing you said is 'are they afraid,' and I want you to know that I'm almost positive that they are not. Dad is not naive, and he's never lived in fear and he's taught Grandma well. They are in this little adventure together."

"I hardly call this an adventure," Bree argued.

Ricky smiled. "Do you want to make a bet that when this is all over they will call it exactly that?"

When neither Bree nor Taylor took the bet, Ricky reached out with both hands and touched the cheeks of his wife and daughter, using his thumbs to wipe at their tears. "We'll get them back. The people who took them don't want them. They want Jeffy. If these guys were to do away with Dad and Shelley, there would be no reason for Jeffy to come to them. So rest assured, they'll be okay. We *will* get them back."

"Are you really gonna let Jeffy give herself up to these people?" Taylor asked.

Ricky glanced over at young Eric who still stood in the threshold. A meeting had taken place earlier that evening and they'd discussed doing exactly that. "This is extremely confidential, Taylor. As soon as we get the ransom note, we're probably gonna let Jeffy go, but we'll be right there with her. We'll bring them all back."

Young Eric smiled from his place in the doorway. He'd attended the meeting and he was glad they weren't gonna just cower and hope they would see their grandparents again. He was looking forward to the oncoming battle, not that he thought his father would let him or his cousins anywhere near the front lines. Still, he felt proud to know they would take care of their own.

"Would you like to stay here with us?" Bree asked her daughter.

Taylor nodded her head and immediately climbed up in bed with her mom. Ricky turned to nod at Eric. "You kids try to get some sleep down there."

"Yes sir," Eric said as he pulled the door closed and headed back to the theater room.

❁

Joey checked on the girls, making sure both Sophia and baby Kelstyn were sound asleep on their little pallets before he crawled into bed with his wife. The moment his weight hit the bed, Breez turned over, her eyes searching his.

"I thought you were asleep," he said wearily.

"I can't sleep."

Sighing, he pulled her closer. "We'll get them back."

"I believe you." She ran her hand over his chest. "I really do. I have all the faith in the world that you'll get them back safe and sound. But I hate to think of what they might be going through."

He hated it too. His mother, his sweet, sweet mother. But she was tough. "Try not to think about it."

When she didn't answer, he patted her belly. "Breez?"

Pulling away, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and went to the window, staring out at the night.

Joey sat up, watched his beautiful wife as she wrung her hands together and fretted. His brows rose in anticipation.

"I, uh, I need to tell you something, Joey."

He nodded carefully. "If you're getting ready to leave me, could you wait just a few days before you lower the boom?"

"Joey, I'm serious. I was gonna tell you before, but then you had to go to Kazakhstan and I thought it would be better if you didn't have this to distract you."

He rose, moved toward her, a feeling of dread simmering in his gut. "Okay."

"And then, you got home today and I was gonna tell you, but, well, you know what happened then."

"Tell me, Breez. Whatever it is we can work it out."

She nodded. "Well, it's not like I think anything needs to be worked out, and I'm sorry for telling you under these trying circumstances but I really think you should know..." She stopped.

"Breez..."

"I'm pregnant."

His mouth fell open, the tension releasing immediately. "Oh."

"Oh?"

He smiled. "I mean, are you upset by this?"

She shrugged. "Well, I know we hadn't planned to have another baby so soon, but, I mean, I don't know how I couldn't be happy about having your baby."

"Then you're okay with it?"

"Are you?"

He smiled. "I'm ecstatic, but I know it's hard on your body. Kelstyn is only fifteen months old."

She nodded. "They'll be about twenty-two months apart. That's not quite as bad as Sophia and Kelstyn. They're only nineteen months apart."

Joey only nodded, thinking how much his mother would love to hear this news.

"What's wrong?" Breez asked.

Joey shrugged. "Thinking about Mom and how happy this would make her."

"She knows. I told her and the other women when Lizzy Tanner announced her pregnancy to the women while you guys were gone."

"Lizzy? You're kidding me."

Breez tried to smile. It was so hard to feel happiness about anything when whatever was happening to Shelley and Eric was like a dark cloud blotting out any light. "No, not kidding. Lizzy and Keegan are gonna have another baby."

Joey understood the note of sadness in her words and pulled her close. "Breez, sweetheart, I promise you now, you and my Mom are gonna be together, making all the plans for this new baby very soon."

Breez nestled her head against her husband's hard chest, taking comfort in the ridges of muscle and sinew. She'd once thought Joey was arrogant and cocky. "Not cocky, confident," he'd told her. And he'd proven over and over that his confidence was well-founded. She would have to trust in his confidence now. Eric and Shelley were coming home.

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Justin Lee watched as his wife, Lori, ran her comb through her short, blond locks. He could just see her through the open bathroom door. She wore her usual t-shirt for bed. Her simplicity was one of the things that attracted him to her.

His wife was an amazing woman. She was quiet, but not shy, because she certainly spoke up when she had an opinion. She was strong, both physically and emotionally. She was intelligent and confident as one had to be as an ER trauma nurse. That's where he'd met her. At the hospital on the day Ricky had fought with Tommy Crane and a stray bullet struck Bree. Lori no longer worked at the hospital. She taught college classes at the nursing school at Caltech.

There was a time Justin thought he'd never find anyone to love like Eric had found Shelley. He faulted Shelley for that. Admittedly, Justin had been a little in love with Shelley. Everyone who met her felt the same way. Then Lori came into his life and everything changed.

He was so proud of Lori. He was fourteen years her senior, but so far that hadn't been an issue. She hadn't been able to have children which was probably one of the reasons she'd been available when he met her. Rather than cry 'woe is me' over being unable to have children, Lori adopted the entire Kino clan to mother and take care of. Although Eric and Shelley held the esteemed position of heads of the Kino family, Lori made herself their rock. A sturdy pair of hands. Help with a skinned knee or a bruised heart.

She loved the newest babies as if they were her own and was always available for questions from the new mothers. She was a steady, calm voice of reason in times of trouble. Times like now.

Justin considered how Lori's presence was so very much like Eric's. She had a calmness about her. She was like Eric in so many aspects, Justin thought of her as the female version of his best friend. It was obvious they were meant to be together.

The bathroom door opened and he caught her eye. She smiled and came to him, standing between his knees and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Are you stressing, Justin?" she asked softly.

He chuckled. "You think you know me so well, don't you? Believe it or not, I wasn't. I was being grateful."

"I'm so proud of you," she purred. "Let's continue with that theme. What are you grateful for?"

"For you," he said.

She smiled at him. "And I am so grateful for you, Justin. For your unassailable love of me. And I'm proud of you."

"For what?"

"Just for being you. Your quiet strength. I know it's killing you, what's happened to Eric and Shelley. You've known Eric longer than anyone. I know you're trying so hard to not worry. You're being strong for the family. I have to say, I'm happy that Ricky recognized your place, not only as the eldest or the one who's known his father the longest, but he was nodding to you as head of the family. Yet, you gave him the nod, the okay, to take over in his father's absence."

Justin shrugged. "Well, it just seemed like the best way to honor Eric in his absence is to honor his son."

Lori's eyes moistened. Grabbing Justin's strong hands from her waist, she squeezed them in her own. "Oh, Justin, you see, that's why I love you so much."

Leaning down, she kissed him tenderly.



Mickey's eyes welled with tears before they spilled over onto her cheeks. She and Jeff listened quietly as Marissa's story tumbled out. Marissa's chin trembled as she spoke about her feelings of inadequacy, of feeling alone.

"But Rissa, you know I've always been here for you. I would never turn you away," Mickey complained.

"I know that, but you and Jeff were so in love and you had the boys to occupy your time. You didn't need me hanging on like a redheaded

stepchild."

"Now you're just being insulting," Jeff said. "We love you, Rissa. You're much more than just my sister-in-law. You're a member of this family. Just as important as Jeremy or Daniel or Mickey or me. A full-fledged member. When you went away to college, we all felt sick with missing you."

Marissa looked up. "Get real."

"It's true," Mickey said. "Jeff kept saying he was gonna fly out to New York and check on you and I kept telling him you'd be embarrassed by that."

Marissa gave a soft laugh. "I wouldn't have minded. I mean, to have a good-lookin' guy show up at my dorm. I would've been the envy of everyone."

"I hate that I didn't realize what a hard time you were having," Mickey said. "I mean, I guess I should have. Our mother killed your father and then she died in a mental institution."

"You make him sound like the victim," Marissa said. "My father abused you and tried to have you killed and mom killed him in some belated effort to save you." She shook her head. "Grandmaster Kino tried to help me get through all these feelings. He *was* helping me, but then I went away to school. He made me promise I would go see this woman he recommended, but I was so busy and it was just too easy to put it off. I thought I was fine. I thought I didn't need any more counseling– until I spoke to him again earlier today." Marissa's lips trembled. "Was it really just today?" She glanced at her watch. "About fourteen hours ago. It seems longer. It seems like forever. Jeff, what are we gonna do without the Kinos?"

"Okay, now, stop that. We'll get them back. We will. And I want a promise from you that when they're back and everything is settled down, you'll make an appointment with Eric and get some clarity and get your life back in order."

"I'll try," Marissa said meekly.

Mickey hugged her sister. "We'll help you, Rissa. You're part of our family and Jeff and me and the boys, we'll help you."

Yeah, Jeff thought, and I think I'll begin by paying a visit to the guy in New York. He won't get away with what he did to Rissa.



"You want me to take her?" Mark asked, watching his wife struggle with their one-year-old daughter who wasn't showing any signs of calming down and going to sleep.

Bella gave a hopeless shrug. "I guess she's picking up on everyone's anxiety."

He rose, took Emily from his wife and bounced her in his arms. "Go lie down, Bella. You're exhausted."

Frowning, Bella did as instructed even though she was sure she wouldn't sleep either. She only obeyed to help relieve Mark from worrying about her along with worrying about everything else.

He paced back and forth, like an anxious tiger, Bella thought. However, the pacing was working, for Em had stopped fussing and was riding quietly in his arms.

Emily, with her dark hair and brown eyes, was the princess of the family. Her brothers doted on her as if the world began and ended with her. She was their little miracle. Actually, Bella's new life was a miracle. Five years ago, she was abused and imprisoned and could never have imagined such a wonderful life waiting for her.

She was now married to Mark, so strong, so peaceful, so protective and so loving. Her son Logan, feeling loved and accepted for the first time in his life, had been adopted by Mark as a true son, and by JoJo as a true brother. The joy in his eyes made Bella grateful every day.

And then, along came Emily, boisterous and demanding. They'd had to go to Eric and Shelley for parenting tips in case she grew up to be a horrible shrew. Both had been so helpful without trying to take over or be intrusive. Bella loved them like they were her own parents.

She looked over as she realized Mark had somehow lured Em to sleep. He laid her down gently on the pallet they'd made, covered her tiny body with a soft blanket and came to sit on the side of the bed.

Bella reached up and rubbed his back. "Thanks, hon. I'm so glad you have the magic touch."

Mark sighed. "Try to rest."

"What about you?"

"I may go for a walk on the beach."

She rose onto her knees, came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "Oh, Mark, please don't go out alone. I understand you're upset, but please, don't go alone. If you don't want to talk to me, find someone."

He turned, surprised by her words. "Why would you think I don't want to talk to you?"

"Well, you want to go walk alone on the beach."

"I'd take you if I thought Em wouldn't wake up."

"Then just stay here and talk to me."

He rubbed his hands over his face. "My mother," he began, then

stopped when his voice broke.

Bella waited patiently while he got himself under control.

"Everyone talks about my mother as being so strong– and she is. Eric has really helped her and taught her, but still, there's this vulnerability. When she hears something on the news about some awful thing someone has done, she gets this look of shock on her face followed by a pained expression. She can't even imagine someone committing some heinous act. And that's good I suppose, but in my mind, that makes her vulnerable."

Bella thought carefully. "You don't want her to lose that childlikeness she wears so well?"

"I guess that's it. I mean, what is she experiencing? Is she frightened? Is she with Eric or have they separated them? And which one of those options would be better? The not knowing is making me crazy. I hate to think of anyone hurting her. And Eric too. I mean, he's my hero, you know?"

"I thought Ricky was your hero," Bella said with a smile.

Mark nodded. "Yeah, Ricky too, but I mean, Eric, he came into our lives when mom was so lonely and Dad was gone. When Eric came everything changed for the better. He's taught us so much. He made me the man I am today."

"You made you, Mark. He may have directed, and pushed, but you made the choices and did the work."

Mark smiled. "That's the same thing he would say." He shook his head. "I hate to think of what could be happening to him. To them. I keep coming up with all these scenarios."

"You're supposed to be imagining positive outcomes."

"Yeah. I know, but Eric killed one of their men and I'm thinkin' they're not gonna be happy about that. I hope they don't decide to retaliate by taking his life, or worse, by doing something to Mom."

Bella reached around, took his face in her hands. "Wipe those thoughts from your mind, Mark. I know it's hard, especially when it's your own mother we're talking about, but you're strong and you can do it. You have to practice what you preach."

Mark drew a breath, nodded his head. "You're right. Of course, you're right. Guess that's why I wanted to walk alone. So that you wouldn't see me being weak."

"Never. You aren't showing weakness. You're showing that you're human and even you, the great Mark Adams needs to vent."

He gave her a small smile. "I'm really glad you're on my side."

She kissed him softly. "Just like you've always been on mine. Come to bed, Mark. You're gonna need to be rested for whatever tomorrow brings."

"As you wish," he quoted from one of the family's favorite movies.



Caroline looked up at her husband as he came into their assigned bedroom. He was a lovely man to look at. Dark hair, cobalt blue eyes, tall and fit. His eyes, however, seemed to reflect exactly what she was feeling. Worry. Stress. Fatigue.

"Who were you talking to out in the hall?" she asked.

Toby offered Caro a weak smile. "Chaz. He's making a run to the store and I was making a donation. Maddie wants to cook breakfast in the morning."

"It's awfully late to go grocery shopping."

Toby shrugged. "It's not like he can sleep."

Caroline sighed. "That's true because I know I'm way too keyed up to sleep."

"I keep trying to think, that this time next week everyone will be home safe and sound and back to planning parties."

"Do you really think Eric and Shelley will be okay?" Caro asked.

"I can think nothing else, darlin'. All I know is, I hope to be some support to Ricky and the family. Way back before you and I were married and you'd gone missing and then ended up in the hospital, I'll never forget that Ricky and Bree took time to fly all the way across the country to offer their assistance. Ricky is a good friend. Loyal and always wanting to be of service. He says he's not even close to being like his father but he's more like his father than he realizes, and I want to help him."

"Your presence here adds to his strength, Toby. I'm sure of it."

"Thanks, baby," Toby said as he sat on the bed and unbuttoned his shirt. "At least we'll be able to actually do something to help tomorrow. Justin has asked you and I to be family spokespersons tomorrow at a press conference since we're used to handling the spotlight. The FBI and Jason will fill us in on what they want us to say and not say. Are you in?"

"Of course. Anything I can do to help."

Toby thought of how his shy little Caro used to be such a wounded bird, and now since helping to run a famous dance school, being a guest choreographer on *America Can Dance* and finally being in the spotlight as a judge, she'd been transformed into a savvy celebrity.

Sighing, Toby stripped down to his boxers and laid on the bed. "I keep thinking about my mother and father and how I'd feel."

Caro settled down in the crook of his arm, lying her head on his chest. "I know, I keep thinking about the Stillwaters, since they're the closest thing to parents that I have. I'd be going crazy out of my mind if it was

them. I have to say, Bree is remarkably strong. So stoic."

He nodded. "The whole family is amazing. Their selfless love for others, their kindness, their strength and unity and their calm under pressure is stuff heroes are made of. Ya know, when I grow up, I wanna be just like them," he said with a smile.

She raised up to look him in the eyes. "Oh, Toby, don't you know? You ARE like them. You've always been my hero. And every day when I pray, I thank God for you. You brought me so much. For that matter, YOU are the reason I even know how to pray, because it was *you* who brought God into my life."

Toby shook his head. "No, baby, it was YOU who brought God *back* into MY life. Because even though you didn't know it, you were *His* before you were born. So, Princess, what say we pray right now and ask Him to bring Eric and Shelley back safe and sound?"

Immediately Caro scooted out of bed onto her knees. Toby joined her, took her hands in his and they prayed.



"And just how long will it be before we hear something?" Jeffy asked as she paced.

Cam didn't answer. It was a rhetorical question. She'd just rattled off a string of them. He watched as she went on. She'd showered and changed into one of Taylor's nightshirts with a picture of Tweetybird on the front. His eyes were drawn to her muscular thighs as she padded barefoot back and forth. Her long, dark curls hung loosely down her back, swinging out and landing gently whenever she reached the end of her route and turned sharply. When she came to an abrupt halt and dramatically pounded her fists against her head he decided it was time to intervene. Rising from the lotus position he'd taken on the floor, he approached her, turned her to face him.

"Jeffy, if it was Ricky who'd been taken and your father was standing here in this room right now, what would he say to you?"

The wildness in her eyes left as she focused on the question, but after only a second, she shook her head. "I don't know. That's why I need him."

He gave her a shake. "Stop. You DO know. Now calm yourself, center your being and answer the question."

Jeffy drew a deep breath, nodded her head and closed her eyes. Several moments later she opened them. "He would say that it was okay to feel the worry and stress. He would tell me to face it, wallow in it completely, and when I've accepted the moment and stopped resisting what is, I will feel much better."

Cam smiled. "That sounds exactly like what he would say. Do you believe in his teachings?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Then honor him by following his counsel." He pulled her down to sit. "Let's wallow. Come on, talk me through it."

Cam listened intently as Jeffy voiced all her worries, all her fears, said the things everyone feared. She cried, she fretted and finally, she calmed as she accepted the moment for what it was. Painful.

When she'd been quiet for some time, Cam reached over and squeezed her hand. She offered a tiny smile. "Thank you, Cam. It feels good to know I can turn to you, that you understand."

"Understand what?"

She shrugged. "Everything. You understand me, my family, what my father was all about and therefore what I'm all about." She brought his hand up to place a kiss on his palm. "I'm so glad that you came back to me, that you worked so hard to make it work between you and me. You have an incredible amount of love in your heart."

"Love for you, Jeffy. Love for us, but if I'm being honest I gotta say, I don't want you to think I'm too noble. I also love what I do. It wasn't much of a sacrifice to work hard and train and allow your father and Ameritech to train me. There are hundreds of applicants trying to get into Jason's program. I was lucky."

"Still, I'm touched by your motivation and through all that training and all those years, you never forgot your love for me."

"My love for you is what kept me going."

She closed her eyes. Sighed. "I'm so tired," she said. "Exhausted. In both body and spirit."

Deciding that she needed to focus on something, he began massaging her shoulders. "Tell me about the effects that processed foods has on the body."

Her eyes closed, Jeffy began to expound on the benefits of pure food choices, and the cancer-causing chemicals and toxic processes used in most all processed foods. It would be sometime before the lecture was over.

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Romans 8:28

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

Chapter Thirteen

Walking across the beach out back of the Kino estate, Jason took a moment to let the cool morning breeze soothe his soul. His heart ached. It was his fault Eric and Shelley had been taken. He should never have given permission to allow the agents assigned to security at the Kino estate to attend Jeffy's homecoming. If they hadn't had his permission, they never would've left the house when Eric insisted they go ahead.

Jason knew that a mood of celebration was a time for an enemy strike. How he'd let himself be sucked in, well, that was it, wasn't it? He'd let himself be sucked into the celebration. He'd let Eric's and Shelley's joy for Jeffy's homecoming, override what he knew was best. Eric was the one who'd taught him that. Still, Jason couldn't hold Eric responsible. It was Eric's child coming home, not Jason's. He was the one who should've been able to keep his head.

He'd gone home for a few hours, tried to console his wife, who was Shelley's best friend, but Angel had been inconsolable. He'd left her sleeping this morning with a promise from Kimmie that she would stay with her.

He shook his head as he thought of Angel's lamentations throughout the night. When Angel and Shelley had first met, Angel had been jealous of Shelley. She hadn't been able to see what Eric saw in her. Angel admitted she'd been downright mean. Yet Shelley had seen past all that to the insecure and lonely girl underneath Angel's glamorous front. Angel said that Shelley had been the first person in her life who'd befriended her out of pure love. Not to be popular. Not for attention. Not for any shallow reason. Just because she thought Angel was worthy of being loved.

Since then, they'd always been there for each other. A quiet, calm, rock of a friendship that would never end. Though Shelley would scoff at the notion, it was through Shelley that Angel had learned true self-esteem and had paid it forward a thousandfold through her campaigns against domestic violence and battered woman syndrome.

Jason breathed a sigh and redirected his mind toward his purpose for being here. Even though he'd worked beside the FBI yesterday combing the crime scene for any evidence, he wanted another look at the beach, hoping

there was something he missed. Unfortunately, he found nothing new.

Before coming outside, he'd gone over the house again. Nothing. Whoever took Eric and Shelley did so quickly. They didn't go into any other part of the house. They came in both front and rear doors, fought with both Eric and Shelley in the dining room and kitchen and left immediately out the rear door. Evidence on the beach and the exterior video supported what Jeffy, in her psychic trance, said happened.

Running a hand through his hair, he looked up as Agent Jon Sweet came down from the house. He'd arrived on the plane yesterday in need of some R&R and instead had immediately resumed working. Jason made a mental note to give him a bonus.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir, but Special Agent Moore has arrived and wants to speak with you," Jon said.

Jason nodded. "I'm on my way." He gave a last glance around and headed up toward the house.

Inside, Jason quickly took note of his own agents. As directed, they'd stationed themselves throughout the main floor, keeping watch over all the activities taking place. Jason had worked so often with the Bureau there was no questioning of his presence or that of his employees. Especially in this circumstance concerning the Kinos.

Special Agent Moore met him as he came through the glass dining-room doors, one hand extended. "Agent Lee, you were up early this morning," he said.

Jason nodded. "Couldn't sleep. Thought I might come over and see if there was anything we missed."

"And?"

Jason shook his head. "Nothing."

"And would you have told me if you HAD found anything?"

Jason smiled. "Probably. Well– maybe."

Moore nodded, appreciating the honesty. "We'll be finished processing and cleaning this mess up sometime today and then I want the family back in this house as soon as possible. I don't want the kidnappers to try to contact them anywhere else."

Jason nodded. "I'll let them know."

Both men turned at the disturbance coming from the front foyer and headed that way.

"I didn't do nothin' man. Let me go."

An FBI agent held a young man, his arm twisted behind his back. The man appeared to be no more than twenty. Long, blond hair, scruffy beard, lean, wearing blue shorts and a dirty yellow t-shirt advertising suntan lotion.

Another agent stepped forward. "He tried to deliver this out at the gate and take off."

"I didn't do nothin' wrong," the boy argued.

Special Agent Moore donned gloves and opened the brown envelope carefully. He removed several 8 x 10 photos and a lengthy letter. He studied each picture before he passed it on to Jason, saving the letter for last.

Jason had to work at keeping his professional demeanor. If the photos had that effect on him, he couldn't even imagine what they were gonna do to the family.

Eric was anchored to a wall, his arms caught in high-tech irons. He wore only gray slacks with no belt. His feet and torso were bare. Rivulets of blood ran from a cut on his face and coursed down his chest. His eyes were open and he appeared alert; however, it was the balled fists, the tension in his jaw and the braced stance of his legs that got to Jason. The tiger, ready to spring if he got the chance. In this case, he supposed it was if the photographer got close enough.

The next picture was much worse. Shelley lay face down, unconscious. She wore only a white bra, white slacks and white tennis shoes. The third picture was also of Shelley. She'd been turned over onto her back. Eyes closed, face swollen, blood tracked from her nose and mouth down her neck to soak into her white bra. It was obvious she'd taken quite a beating. Whether that beating took place here in this house or was a subsequent altercation, he didn't know.

Jason looked up at the guy who'd brought the pictures. "I'm assuming you don't know anything about these?"

Jason purposely allowed the boy to see what he'd brought and as expected, the boy's face paled.

"I, I, didn't know. I mean, this guy just asked me to deliver them. He gave me a hundred bucks. It's in my pocket. I swear, man, you have to believe me."

"I do," Jason said calmly, hoping to help steady the kid because he would be able to give them more information if he was calm enough to think straight.

"Try to get some prints off the money," Special Agent Moore said to one of the agents. "Search, secure and sit him down. We have some questions for him."

Question him all you want, Jason thought. He won't know much of anything.

Moore waited for them to take the boy into the other room before he looked over the letter and then, sighing, handed it to Jason.

Jason read it slowly and when he reached the end he couldn't help the

two-word prayer that escaped his lips. "Dear Jesus."



He'd been sure he'd be the only one up and on the beach at sunrise and yet, as he limped down close to the water, he saw Jeffy and Cam stretching out. He nodded his head in a slight bow and they started toward him. As they neared, Ricky smiled at them. "I'd be honored if you would join me."

Both Jeffy and Cam bowed. "The honor would be ours," they said in unison. Jeffy and Cam glanced quickly at each other as if surprised they'd both used the same words.

But Ricky wasn't surprised at all. His eyes moistened. They'd used the same words they all use, because they'd been taught by the same man; his father.

The threesome turned when they saw movement behind them. They smiled, their hearts filling with love. Coming down to the beach were Mark and Joey, JoJo, Logan and young Eric, and bringing up the rear was John, Jodi and Jake Appel.

Ricky offered the same greeting to them as they neared. When the entire group uttered the same response, he couldn't keep the tear from coursing down his cheek.

"Will you do us the honor of leading?" John asked.

Ricky nodded and bowed slowly before he led the group. "I'll do my best. Leg's a little gimpy."

"Your best is good enough," John replied.

Ricky led them through a combination of the Kino personal daily stretch and morning routines, and ended in the usual prayer and meditation. This morning the prayer was done by holding hands in a circle. They had all knelt in their personal family morning prayers, but the moment of these warriors coming together on the beach and the strong feeling of connection to God, had to be taken.

When they finished their meditation, they rose from the lotus position and bowed to each other.

"What is that awesome smell coming from the house?" Joey asked.

"Maddie wanted to cook for you this morning," Jodi answered.

"Cook for this giant group? She shouldn't be doing that."

"Are you kidding me? She's in her element. She says there's not much in this world that can't be helped by a home-cooked meal made with loving hands."

"Well, I'm inclined to believe that she's right about that and I intend to go up there and show Miss Maddie some gratitude," Ricky said with a nod.

They made their way up to the house, walked in through the large open

patio doors and were enveloped in a cacophony of sights, smells and sounds. Amazing aromas, babies chattering, and beautiful, freshly showered women talking softly.

Jeffy stood just inside the kitchen door and watched as Ricky found Bree and kissed her, Mark headed straight to Em in her high chair and kissed the baby and then the baby's mother. Joey performed almost the same thing but added the hug of an adorable three-year-old to the mix. JoJo approached Laynah, young Eric spoke to the Anderson twins and Logan tickled his baby sister, Emily. Jodi, John and Jacob began taking directions from Maddie, getting down stacks of plates, finding orange juice, pulling glasses from the dishwasher. Jeffy had longed for this for the past year and a half. She let the sounds of normalcy wash over her, listening with her heart to the little nips of conversation.

"It's pepper gravy. It's a southern thing. Try it, you'll like it."

"I love the smell of your shampoo. What kind is it?"

"Hot sauce on eggs?"

"No, hardly slept at all."

"Just some strawberries for me."

"Yes, scratch right there. Oooh, thank you, that's much better."

"The fluffiest pancakes I've ever tasted."

"Green smoothies! Miss Maddie you've thought of everything."

"I don't care right now how fattening it is."

"Need to pick up some clean underwear at the store if they don't let us back in at the other house."

"What time is Grace's and Brody's plane coming in today?"

"Biscuits and gravy? Oh, Miss Maddie, you rock."

"Where's Grandma? I want my grandma!"

Jeffy's heart took a tumble. She watched as Bella crooned soft words to Emily who'd demanded to see her grandmother. Suddenly, the room was silent. It was Jason's voice who broke the silence.

"Uh, Rick. Need to see you."

Ricky looked up from the plate he held in his hand as he'd leaned against a counter, eating fruit and eggs. He placed his plate on the counter and headed toward the living room.

Jason nodded at everyone, finding who he needed to find. "Joey, Mark, Keegan, Jeff, Cam, you too."

Bree rose. "Don't even think about leaving Jeffy and me out."

Jason hesitated, then finally nodded. "Fine. As for the rest of you, I'll leave it to your significant others to fill you in," he said as he followed Bree and Jeffy into the living room.

In the large formal living room which looked more like an open rotunda

with white chairs, glass tables and crystal chandeliers, the group stood anxiously waiting for Jason to spill what news he had.

"Better sit down," Jason said to Bree.

Both Bree and Jeffy took a seat in the comfy upholstered chairs that sat at opposite sides of the seating area. Jason held up a folder. "We received these this morning. A kid was paid to deliver them. He gave us a description of the man. Not too helpful. FBI is running tests on the original envelope and contents. These are copies."

He handed the folder to Ricky. Bree, accustomed to studying facial expressions, didn't bother to watch for Ricky's reaction. She knew he would be stone-faced, which was telling in itself.

She watched the others as they looked at the pictures. Ricky passed the folder to Mark. His only reaction was running a hand through his hair. Joey was next. Nothing from him. Bree held out her hand. Joey eyed her as he placed the folder against her palm. She opened the folder and immediately began to cry. She passed the folder up to Keegan who stood by her side. He cursed. Keegan passed it to Jeff. He sighed. Jeff passed it to Cam. Nothing. Finally, Cam walked it to Jeffy, knelt down in front of her and handed her the folder.

Jeffy opened the folder slowly. There was a sharp indrawn breath. Her fingers reached to trace the outline of her mother's and father's bodies. After a long while, she looked up at Jason. "They're okay."

He raised a brow.

"I mean, emotionally. They're okay. I think. Yeah, they're okay. They're not afraid. They know I'm— " She stopped.

"You're what?" Jason asked.

"Nothing. I mean, for some reason they know everything is gonna be okay. Is this all they sent? They didn't send any demands?"

"They did," he said with a sigh. He opened his jacket, took a sheaf of papers from his pocket. "They sent this letter." He passed out as many copies of the letter as he had, leaving Cam and Jeff to wait.

The room was silent while they read the script of a madman.

> *Come to me June Flower Kino. I'm waiting. Together we will certainly change the world. More likely, rule it.*
>
> *I feel I must exonerate myself. I was not the one who tried to push you off the bridge. I was not the one who used explosives to obliterate you in your tent while you slumbered peacefully. How wonderful to find that you were not where you were supposed to be that night. Even though there was collateral damage, namely, those children you fancied yourself*

in love with, you simply must feel the joy of being alive. The world needs you. Loksalle did not understand this. I do.

I'm sorry about your parents. Truly. It's regrettable that I had to resort to such lengths to get your attention and have you take me seriously. Did you know I tried to email you? Many times, actually. You must change your email address quite often for it always bounced back to me. It was frustrating to say the least. It almost seemed a personal affront. I could be hurt. I won't be. I'm sure this little episode, the taking of your parents, is certainly revenge enough for the slight you gave me. But really, my love, I am not seeking revenge. I am seeking so much more than something as trivial as revenge.

I realize the FBI and Ameritech people are perusing these words meant only for you, so I will have to keep the rest of my plans for you a secret. One day, however, you will stand alongside me and our children and laugh at their efforts to stop us.

So . . . you must, of course, come to rescue your parents. I'm afraid I had to allow my man to mistreat them a bit, just so you know that I can be ruthless. Ah, but Payne, he is much more ruthless than I. Sometimes I think he's a little off-balance if you know what I mean. For now, your parents are safe. But if I feel you are dawdling or enlisting help, they will be submitted to much worse than what appears in those photographs.

I'm sure you are wishing me to get straight to the instructions. But then, this time that I've waited so long for would be over and I'm so happy to finally be communicating with you that I want to play a game of sorts. I'm sure you've heard that brilliant minds think alike. I want to see just how alike we are. Solve the equation below to discover where you must go, and when, in order to be given transportation to see your loved ones.

Jeffy eyed the equation quickly then went on to read the last few paragraphs.

It will take you some time to solve the equation, Dr. Kino. Take care that you work quickly and beat the Feds, for if they accompany you to the meeting place, you will never see your parents again. Once you arrive at the correct place at the correct time, you will see four black GMC Yukons circling the

area. You get in one. The others will provide both cover and decoy. Don't get your hopes up. I've chosen the location well. It would be extremely difficult to have surveillance. Any sign of Feds or Ameritech or even local cops and we will call the whole thing off and you can say goodbye to your parents. I know that's not what you want.

Oh, by the way, Here's a key... k=2/2 Π

While I'm waiting I've decided to do some genetic testing on your parents. After all, they must be very special people to have created such an amazing specimen of a human being. You are human, June Flower, are you not? Sometimes even I myself wonder. When you have solved the equation and have come alone to the place indicated, you will be whisked away to join me. Your parents are here. Once you have agreed to all the things I have planned for us, they will be released. I swear it. I am a man of my word.

Ah, June Flower, I feel myself in the throes of passion as I envision meeting you for the very first time. My body and mind thrum with a vibration that only you can answer. I wait patiently for you to take your place on the symbolic throne beside me.

Humbly and most sincerely yours,

TBA

The equation followed.

"This guy is freakin' whacko," Joey said vehemently.

"Which makes him even more dangerous," Jason stated calmly.

"He expects Jeffy to have his babies," Bree uttered, almost to herself. "He's completely out of his mind."

Jeffy stood abruptly. "May I have your pen?" she asked Jason.

He reached inside his breast pocket, handed her a pen. Jeffy reached out and grabbed the letter Ricky was holding, placed it face down on the glass coffee table, sat down on the floor and began scribbling madly.

Mark looked over her shoulder then back up at everyone else's questioning stares. "She's working on the equation."

Cam started out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Jeff asked.

"To get more paper, a computer, a calculator and some pencils," he answered as he left.

"Probably easier to go back to my office," Ricky said.

Cam nodded and rather than speak to her, merely lifted Jeffy up and carried her back.

"So," Ricky said to Jason. "What do you think about this?"

Jason shook his head. "I think the man is unstable, extremely dangerous and he has a man working for him that even he believes to be ruthless. That makes me uncomfortable to say the least."

"How long do you think we really have before he lets this guy loose on Dad and Shelley again?"

Jason shrugged. "He's given Jeffy some time to work this equation, whatever 'some time' means. Two days? Twenty-four hours? He says he's gonna do genetic testing. That takes time, right? Your guess is as good as mine, right now. We need to ask Jeffy how much time she thinks it will take to solve the equation."

Ricky nodded, ran a hand through his thick, black hair. "Okay."

Jason's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

"Um, Dad?" JoJo asked from the doorway. "Everyone is on pins and needles waiting to hear what the news is."

Mark nodded. "Do me a favor JoJo. Have everyone assemble in the den, but ask Taylor if she'll take the little ones downstairs to the playroom."

JoJo nodded. "Yes sir. Uh, what constitutes a little one?"

"Everyone younger than Taylor."

"Yes sir."

Mark raised his eyebrows at Joey. "Let's fill them in."

Joey nodded. He reached down and pulled Bree to her feet. Solemn-faced, she joined the rest as they moved to the den.

Jason went along, watched the group as they were briefed on the news and made himself available to answer any questions. The initial shock ended, questions asked and answered, and the pictures were being mulled over, when Jason pulled his brother aside to have a private word with him.

They stepped into a corner of the living room.

"Do I look stupid to you?" Jason asked when he had Justin alone.

"Stupid? No. Why?"

"Not one time has one person in this family come to me to ask me what the plan is or what the FBI or I intend to do about this problem."

"Okay," Justin said slowly.

"And that means, they haven't asked because they already have a plan of their own."

The light went on in Justin's eyes. "Ah, I see what you're saying. So, just what do you think they have planned?"

"Well, if it's something they don't want me to know about, then it's

something I would disagree with."

"Like?"

"Probably like using Jeffy to lure the kidnappers out."

Justin shook his head. "I can't imagine they would do that. They would never put Jeffy in danger."

"No, not usually. Their grief though, is palpable, and they don't have it in them to sit idly by when they're all so fierce and capable. I think that grief blinds them and I don't think they will be thinking clearly enough to realize the risks of putting Jeffy out there."

"So do you intend to stop them?"

Jason thought for several moments before he finally answered. "No. I'm not sure I *can* stop them. Instead, I think I'll be their backup. An outside watcher can see things from a different perspective."

Justin nodded.

"I will have a word with Ricky though, put in some kind of contingency plan in case things go wrong." He sighed. "Just do me a favor and keep your eyes and ears open," Jason said. "I want to know their plans if at all possible." He smiled then. "So– I don't look stupid?"

Justin smiled. "Not in my eyes, little bro."

❁

Eric rose the second the door whooshed open, but as before, men moved in quickly, weapons drawn.

Shelley took down the piece of Eric's shirt he'd wet in the bathroom and had her holding to her swollen eye. She stood shakily, watching as the man named Payne pressed a sequence of keys and opened the small panel box by the door.

A few seconds later the door on the wall opened. The two other men holstered their weapons and grabbed Eric by each arm. He didn't resist. He didn't dare for fear they would retaliate by hurting Shelley.

They pushed his arms up over his head until they slid into the cuffs. Payne pushed a button and once again the cuffs shut tightly.

Payne moved forward, smiling at Eric. "Tell me, how does it feel? Being so helpless, I mean. You're not used to that, are you, Grand—master—Kino?"

Eric thought quickly about why Payne would slowly enunciate his title. It would be because he resented it or envied it. Which means, he coveted respect himself and had not received it.

Payne drew back and punched Eric in the stomach. Eric had been able to tighten his diaphragm in time. Still, he grunted as if he were in pain, thinking it would give the man some satisfaction.

"Answer my question," Payne commanded. "How does it feel being so helpless?"

Eric nodded. "Why don't *you* tell *me*?"

Payne's eyebrows rose. "What did you say?"

"Why don't *you* tell *me* how it feels to be helpless," Eric repeated.

Shelley whimpered and Eric glanced in her direction. The look of fear on her face was not for herself, but for him. She didn't realize he needed to show some strength or there would be a free-for-all. He tried to communicate with her through his eyes to let her know it was okay, but the next punch grazed his jaw and made him dizzy.

Payne moved close, the small smile on his face making Eric nervous. "You are about to feel completely helpless," Payne said softly. He turned abruptly. "Bring her."

Shelley screamed as one man attempted to grab her around the waist. She elbowed him in the nose and had him doubling over. She fought with the second man, evading capture for a minute until the first man recovered and helped. Each grabbed one of her arms and began dragging her from the room.

"No," she screamed, using her feet to catch against the doorjamb and propel them back into the room. They jerked her upright, twisted her arms up behind her back until she became still and dragged her from the room.

"Let me go," she growled. "Eric!"

Payne eyed Eric, enjoying the way the man's body was taut with tension as he stood bound to the wall. Giving him a mock salute, Payne stepped out of the room. The door hissed shut.

Eric felt sick, hearing Shelley's screams cut off abruptly as the sound-proof door closed. Payne was absolutely correct. He felt completely helpless. Yet, even bound to a wall there was something he could do. He would use the power of the mind and the gifts God gave him to work toward their release.



They pushed her roughly down the corridor. It seemed to go on forever. Shelley tried to remember her way back to Eric, just in case by some stroke of luck, she escaped. The walls were gray, but at the end of the corridor, she saw a yellow infinity symbol on an exposed steel beam higher up on the wall. There were no windows, making her think they were underground.

They turned right and walked to the end of the next corridor where elevator doors awaited.

Once inside the elevator Shelley glanced at the buttons. Six floors! Where in the heck was she? Wherever it was, it was definitely a modern,

state of the art structure. She glanced up at Payne who stood silently by the door. "Where are you taking me?"

He glanced down at her as if he hadn't realized she was there. He didn't bother to answer. The door opened and she was pushed forward.

This corridor was carpeted in stripes of blues and grays. There were several doors along the way and the small signs on the wall next to the doors had her trembling in fear. Radiology. Lab III. Forensics. PreOp. She stopped, tried to pull away. "Please, let me go," she begged.

They jerked her forward, opened a large door and dragged her through. A woman behind the glass in a white lab coat motioned them forward. "Bring her back," she said as she pushed a buzzer and a door unlocked.

Shelley struggled against their hold. They had to drag her kicking and screaming through the door.

"Take her in the dressing room and get her ready," the woman ordered.

Payne nodded at the two men who held Shelley. Tightening their hold, they pulled her behind the large curtain.

It was all a blur. Shelley fought with her last ounce of strength as the two men removed her clothes from her body. Together, they held her still enough to thread her arms through the sleeves of a blue hospital gown, turning it so that it opened in the front.

She fought hard, not bothering to even try to stop the tears that ran down her cheeks. She screamed, she cursed, she begged. They lifted her off the floor and slammed her onto a large gurney. One man practically sat on her to keep her down while the other strapped her right arm down by her side. When he finished, the other strapped down her left arm.

Once she was secure they backed off, breathing hard.

"Freakin' witch is a wildcat, man."

The other didn't answer. He did, however, wipe at the lines of blood oozing from his cheek where Shelley had scratched him. Moving toward her now that she was restrained, he leaned close. "Look, lady, I don't blame you for being upset, but you can stop kicking. You ain't goin' nowhere. He's not gonna hurt you or anything like that. You aren't gonna feel a thing."

"Who?" she screamed. "What are you talking about? What are they gonna do to me?"

The woman came back through the curtain. She'd changed into blue scrubs. "Help me get her feet in the stirrups."

Shelley blinked hard at what she'd just heard. There was a buzzing in her head and she realized she might pass out. The bottom of the gurney was broken away, and large, stainless steel stirrups were attached. Shelley was so exhausted, she barely even tried to resist. It was futile and she knew it.

The men secured her legs in the stirrups then were dismissed.

The woman wheeled her down a short beige-colored hallway with pictures of leaves and frogs and bees and fetuses along the walls. She was pushed through a double swinging door. Shelley's eyes blinked hard as she peered around the room. It seemed she was in some sort of operating room.

The gurney came to a halt in the very center of the room. The woman touched a button on the side of the bed and it rose. The woman then rolled over a tray of supplies and began to administer an IV.

"Please, why are you doing this?" Shelley cried, but the woman pretended like she didn't even exist.

"Calm yourself," a man's voice said softly as he walked briskly into the room.

Shelley eyed him warily. He was a slim man with black hair, black mustache and dark eyes. Maybe fortyish. He too, wore blue scrubs.

"Who are you?" Shelley demanded. "What do you want with me?"

He regarded her calmly. "I know this may be a little frightening. Though, from watching you downstairs, I was beginning to think that nothing scares you. As your husband has already told you, it's your daughter I want, not you. Still, in the meantime, I am going to run some tests on you and your husband to see how you were able to produce such an amazing offspring."

"Tests? What kind of tests?"

"We're gonna remove some of your eggs."

"My eggs? Are you out of your mind?"

He only smiled at her.

"Even I know you can't just remove eggs. It takes time. I would have to take hormones for several weeks."

He frowned, her words stinging his ego. "That procedure is what the rest of the world uses and is outdated. I am Dr. Julian Black, a renowned geneticist." His lips curled slightly. "Now don't you worry. You won't feel a thing. I've had your medical records imported and..."

"My medical records? You can't do that!"

He smiled again. "Ms. Kino, I think you will find that I can pretty much do anything I want. No one is the wiser. This facility is mine, built by my people, operated by my people, all hand-picked. Security is tight. No one comes in and no one goes out without my knowledge. Now, as I was saying, I've been over your medical records and I was tickled to find that you are only now beginning with your peri-menopausal state, which means you still have eggs with which I can play." He looked her over and smiled. "You are quite a specimen yourself," he said, running his hand over her neck, probing her glands.

"I'm not a specimen, you jerk, I'm a person."

He smiled again and Shelley found his little arrogant smirk made her want to rip his face off.

"Oh, no, Shelley Kino, you're much more than a person." He shone a light in her eyes. "Keep your eyes still and look right here," he said, pointing at the bridge of his nose."

"Go to hell," she said, moving her eyes around rapidly.

He only chuckled. "Your spirit is indomitable. I find that very attractive. Open your mouth," he said, pressing so hard on her chin that she had to obey. "Good," he mumbled. He produced a stethoscope and began listening to her heart. He continued a thorough exam until he finally nodded at the woman in scrubs. "Go ahead and put her under. I don't think she's gonna be very cooperative."

"No!" Shelley said quickly. "I'll cooperate. I promise."

He shook his head. "Too late. Don't worry. I won't have too much fun with your remarkable body. Besides, it's for the best. Some of the procedures are somewhat painful."

Shelley couldn't help the hopeless tears that welled in her eyes. The woman injected something into the IV line and that was the last thing she remembered.

❁

Ricky wandered around the house. There was something he was missing but he couldn't put his finger on it. He'd been over and over all the facts in his head until his eyes crossed. Sighing, he slumped down in the den, thankful that he was presently alone. The rest of the household had dispersed into different areas.

It was only ten in the morning, just a few hours since Jeffy had begun working on the equation. He wanted to ask her how it was going but was afraid of breaking her concentration.

Ricky scooped up the pictures still lying on the table in the den and stared at them. It was hard to grasp. These weren't just pictures. His father truly was being held against his will. Shelley truly had bruises on her face, the result of some man's fist. Some dead man's fist, Ricky thought, allowing the vengeful side of his personality to take over briefly. No. Couldn't think like that. His father would tell him to concentrate on the solution.

But what was it? His father was restrained, attached to a wall by some heavy duty cuffs just like Jeffy had told them in her vision. Next to him, several shelves of nasty looking instruments of torture sat on a row of metal shelves. Jeffy had said they appeared to be floating beside him. It must have

been difficult for her to see the actual shelves. Still, she'd done a darn good job of describing the circumstances. Her psychic abilities were definitely real.

Suddenly he sat up. She *had* done a darn good job. As a matter of fact, she'd been right on. He needed to integrate that fact. Jeffy's talent was not just a quirk. All her life they'd talked about her being psychic. They'd played around with it, exercised it, but they'd never really tried to use it. They'd merely accepted it, but if they truly believed she was psychic then they needed to act like they believed by using her abilities here and now.

He rose quickly, grimacing at the stiffness in his thigh. Gathering the pictures, he called his son. "Eric!"

It took only a few seconds before he heard footsteps pounding from the back of the house where the theater room was located.

"Yes sir?" Eric said breathlessly. JoJo, Logan and Jacob appeared behind him. "Gather everyone together. We're gonna have a psychic session with Jeffy."

"A psychic session? Cool. Where you want everyone?"

"Let's do the living room. Move all the furniture aside. I'll go talk to Jeffy."

"Yes sir," the boys all said together.

"I'll go move the furniture," Jacob offered.

"I'll help you," JoJo said. "Logan, you and Eric, go round up the troops."

They took off.

Ricky made his way back to the office where Jeffy was working feverishly. When he opened the door she frowned up at him.

Cam, who sat in a chair working on a laptop, glanced at Ricky, held his finger up to have him wait and finished speaking to Jeffy. "She says she's driving, but she'll get right on it the moment she gets to her office."

Jeffy nodded, then looked at Ricky. "Yes?"

"How's it going?"

She frowned. "Not well. I'm calling in favors. Cam was just emailing Marie Laughlin and Pedro Cortez. They were in my counseling group for misunderstood brainiacs. They're gonna help with the equation as soon as they can get to a computer."

"Misunderstood brainiacs? Right. Listen, Jeffy, I hate to interrupt you, but I think I have an idea."

"Shoot."

"I want you to come sit in the center of our group and try to get a reading on Dad and Shelley."

Jeffy frowned. "Been there, done that."

"And you were right on. What you described was exactly what was in the photos. I feel strongly about this, Jeffy. We've—you've never really tried to harness your talent, your power, whatever you want to call it. You're psychic, Jeffy. In more ways than one."

"You're talking about trying to do a remote viewing type thing?"

"Yeah, maybe. Only, remote viewers usually don't have a connection to their subjects. I'd say you have a strong connection to Mom and Dad, especially since you and Dad have actually played mind games together. Jeffy, I think with everyone's help we can up the frequency like we did yesterday, and you just might be able to get a fix. I'm thinking you can try to tune into their minds. Isn't that what you do when you do your mind-melding thing? So what if they're not sitting right next to you. We're all made of particles of energy, right? Not just our physical bodies but our spirits, right? And if that's true then we're all connected anyway, right?"

Jeffy nodded. "Yes, that's what I believe and what quantum physics is now proving."

"Then it doesn't matter if they're standing right next to you or are halfway around the world. You can join your mind to theirs. I think you should probably go with Dad, since his mind is probably a little more calm than Shelley's is right now. Will you give it a try?"

She sighed. "Yes, I'll try anything. I'm certainly not gonna waste time arguing with you about whether it will work. Let's do it. I needed a break anyway. Go ahead and call everyone together."

"It's done. Just waiting on you."

Jeffy rose, reached out to Cam. "Are you in?"

He took her hand. "Do you even have to ask?"

The three entered the living room. The group had assembled. Some sat cross-legged. Some assumed the lotus position. Most of them had their eyes closed as Jodi led them through a prayer and meditation, gathering the light of God, the light of Christ, the light of love.

Jeffy moved forward and took her position in the center of the group. "Um, just wanna say thanks to all of you for believing in me and for helping me to try this. Ricky's right, I've never really tried to harness this gift I've been given."

"Well, in your defense, Jeffy," Bree said with a soft chuckle. "You've been concentrating on healing the world."

Jeffy smiled at her older sister. "Thanks, Bree. I love you."

"Love you too, baby girl."

"Maybe I should take the little ones off to another room," Lisa Stewart suggested.

Ricky shook his head. "No. Children are the most pure and hold the

most light. '"Suffer the children to come unto me,'" he quoted. "I think they'll be okay. If they get real fussy you can take them out but let's let them try."

Everyone nodded. Ricky took over for Jodi, leading everyone through a deep prayer and meditation. He asked them to bring the light of Jesus Christ into their bodies through the crowns of their heads, directing it to their hearts to be filled with His love and light, then sending it down their arms, through their hands and into Jeffy.

The room seemed to grow warmer. Someone began to hum softly, a childhood song about sunshine, which lightened everyone's mood and caused some smiles.

"I know *that* song," little Sophia said in her adorable munchkin voice, making some of the grownups laugh.

Ricky smiled, feeling the room fill up with love.

Jeffy began to breathe hard. "I, I can see Dad. He's still restrained. His legs are tired, so tired." She gasped. "He's– he's calling to me with his mind. He's been calling to me. Mom has been taken away from him. He doesn't know where she is and he's worried about her, but I'm not to think about that. He's trying to push those thoughts aside. He can feel me. He knows I've tuned into him. He doesn't know where he is. It took them several hours to get there. He thinks they're in an underground facility. He's gonna try to find out more about where they are." She shook her head. "He's repeating everything."

"Can you put thoughts in his head? Can you project?" Ricky asked.

"I can try. What do you want me to say?"

"Tell him we're coming for him. Give him the information from the letter. The more knowledge he has the better armed he is."

Jeffy closed her eyes, concentrated hard for several minutes. "I don't know if I'm getting through."

"Keep the light flowing, everyone," Ricky urged.

Jeffy jerked upright. "Oooh," she whimpered softly.

"Are you okay?" Cam whispered.

Tears ran down her face. "It's Mom. She's back with Dad. She's being rolled in on a gurney. She's wearing a hospital gown. She's sad, sick. She can't concentrate. I think she's sedated. She's being moved onto another gurney that is in the room. The empty gurney is being pushed out. No. It's being brought close to Dad."

Her voice rose. "I don't have time now, sweetie. Try to reach me again later. I should know more soon. Sorry, sweetie, everything is gonna be okay. Keep it up. You're doing good. You're doing real good."

Jeffy drew a deep breath, blinked several times and finally looked up at

the group. "He's gone. I can't feel him anymore."



Julian Black stormed back and forth across his office as Payne watched from his chair.

"She had to know," Black complained. "She had to know I was looking forward to the press conference. Not one member of the family showed. Not one. I mean, some country singer and a dancer? They got some of their showbiz friends to represent the family? Unbelievable."

He stopped, ran a hand through his hair. He needed to get control of his emotions. He'd been looking forward to seeing her on camera, see the tears course down her cheeks as she begged him to let her parents go. See her beautiful face, her amazing body, her glorious hair. He cursed, blew out a breath, stood straight and turned to face Payne. "Okay. No problem. I'll have her here with me soon enough. Though I admit, it makes me want to go in there and hurt the mighty Eric Kino. Still, I won't. I'll just get my samples and..."

"Then let me do it."

"Excuse me?"

Payne rose, and went to the bar for a drink. "I'm saying let me go in there and hurt him."

Julian Black eyed the man as he considered the proposal. Finally, he shook his head. "No. That would be crass and I am never crass. Besides, I promised her that her parents wouldn't be hurt again unless she took too long to figure out the equation and I like to think I'm a man of my word. The Kinos don't have a monopoly on honor. So, no, I won't hurt him." He sighed. "Still, the man is an amazing specimen. I will enjoy examining him."

"I would like to make him suffer," Payne complained.

Black smiled. "Well, maybe I won't use anesthesia when I collect the sperm. Will that satisfy your craving for pain?"

"Collect sperm? Why would you need to use anesthesia?"

"Well, you usually wouldn't perform a percutaneous epididymal sperm aspiration through the scrotum without anesthesia."

"What's wrong with the old-fashioned way?" Payne asked, pumping his fist back and forth.

"Nothing. Actually, it's preferable. I would be able to collect considerably more viable sperm, but given his being in a little bit of an emotionally upsetting situation, I don't think it's possible. Of course, there is electroejaculation using electrical stimulation. That would also require anesthesia. Hmm— "

Payne smiled. "I don't think Kino being upset is a problem. He has complete control of his emotions. What he has is an iron will. If he doesn't want to give you a sample, he won't."

Black shrugged. "So, like I said, I will collect it through the scrotum."

"Let me try."

"Try what?"

"Let me try to collect a sample from him."

Black eyed the man and then gave a soft chuckle. "You want to humiliate him." He shrugged. "That's fine with me, Payne. If that's what you'd like to do, you go right ahead. However, if you're gonna do it, I want it done right. Marilyn will explain the procedure to you. I have to have those samples under completely sterile conditions."

Payne grinned. "Whatever you say. You're the boss."

"Yes, yes I am. And I'll be watching."

"The more the merrier."

❁

Shelley awoke with a jolt as she slipped from the gurney onto the cold floor. She lay there several minutes, first experiencing the coldness and hardness of the floor beneath her cheek, then the aches and pains in her body. Moaning, she pushed herself up to a sitting position and immediately looked for Eric. When she didn't see him, she called out for him softly, thinking he was in the bathroom, but he didn't answer.

She stood, wincing at the pain in her head, her hand pressed against the wall for balance. "Eric?" she called louder, but didn't wait for an answer. The bile rose as nausea overtook her and she stumbled into the bathroom and threw herself down by the toilet. Once the retching stopped, she went to the sink and cleaned her mouth.

Stripping the hospital gown from her body, she used it as a washcloth, doing her best to wash her body and cleanse away the feeling of being violated. Of course, she knew that feeling was all in her mind and she had to accept the fact that she'd let them touch her psyche, if only briefly. Though she'd fought hard, she'd let fear into her mind. She'd allowed it to take control for a few minutes. She resolved to be stronger and to forgive herself, knowing that self-flagellation was just another way to be a victim.

She wanted Eric, needed him and hoped desperately that he would soon be back with her. The not knowing was the worst. She finished washing, wrapped the gown around her body and went back into the room. She went to the box by the door and started trying to punch the right button sequence, but after maybe thirty minutes of that, she grew dizzy and headed back for

the gurney.

Her eyes opened wide when she spotted her clothes on the gurney. Her underwear, her white slacks, her bra and her shoes and socks all clean and folded nice and tidy. Along with the clothes was a gray t-shirt that had a logo on the breast pocket that looked like a yellow infinity symbol and the word, "GEDNAR."

She dressed quickly and was tying her shoes when the cell door opened.

Eric stood in the doorway dressed in a blue hospital gown. His eyes grew calm the moment he saw her. He smiled at her, then stumbled forward when they gave him a shove. That's when Shelley noticed his legs had been shackled.

He caught himself on his forearms and knees and turned quickly to sit on the floor against the wall.

Payne nodded at Shelley with a sly smile on his face. While the same two men who'd dragged Shelley from the room earlier kept their weapons trained on Eric, Payne knelt down in front of him and removed the leg shackles and the handcuffs. Grabbing both in his left hand, he held his right hand out to Eric.

"It's been a pleasure," he said with a grin.

"That's what they all say," Eric responded without offering his hand, making the two men with firearms laugh.

Payne's face turned red with anger. Standing quickly he moved toward the door. "When Black releases you, you're mine."

Eric nodded. "I am very much looking forward to it."

Shelley watched them as they tossed Eric's clothes onto the floor and left the room.

Immediately she ran to him and threw herself into his arms. "Oh, Eric, are you okay?"

He ran a hand over her face, frowning. "The question is, are you?"

"I'm fine. They did something to me. Took eggs from me. They put me out."

"DNA testing. He wants to do some genetics testing. This guy, Julian Black, I think I've heard of him. He runs in Jeffy's circles. He's some kind of high genius who's on the cutting edge of genetics. He wants to find out how we were able to procreate Jeffy. He fancies himself in love with her. He wants her to have his children. He actually thinks she'll join him."

"How could he possibly believe that?"

"He's counting on her love for us. He says if she joins him, he will allow us to live."

"The man is out of his mind," Shelley said. "Doesn't he realize that Jeffy would nev— "

He touched a finger to her lips, leaned down and kissed her softly before he whispered in her ear. "Remember, he's listening."

Shelley nodded, breathed in the scent of the man she loved, nestled her head against his chest.

He rubbed his hand over her back. "I see they finally gave you a shirt to wear."

"Yeah, nice of them, huh? Seeing as how they ripped the other one into several pieces."

Eric chuckled.

"How did you learn so much about this guy?" Shelley whispered.

He smiled. "I cooperated."

"What do you mean?"

"I let them run their tests. I cooperated and in return, they didn't put me out. I struck up a conversation with both Payne and Julian Black. I learned quite a bit."

"Oh. What kind of tests did they run?"

"They examined me, drew blood, and collected urine and sperm."

"Sperm? How did they..."

"The usual way."

She rose up, brushed her hand over his face, realizing what he'd been through. "Oh, Eric, I'm so sorry they did that to you."

He smiled. "Sweetheart, listen, what have we talked about? What did you scream at them just yesterday?"

"It's just a body. They can't touch your mind. You are only a victim if you allow yourself to be, but— "

"But nothing. Do you think I can counsel you to think that way and not live by what I teach?" He hugged her, smiled down at her. "There's nothing for me to be ashamed of. I have a healthy body in good working condition. It's no different than if they were to cut me to make me bleed.

"But how?"

"You want me to get graphic?"

She shook her head. "No, I guess not. They let your hands loose?"

"No. Someone did it for me."

"Who?"

He was silent.

"Payne?"

"Yes, Payne. He thought he could get to me."

"I don't understand how you did it."

He shrugged. "It was either agree to that or they were gonna put me to sleep. I had to remain awake in order to get information. So, I did what I had to do."

"Okay, I understand that part, but, I mean, I don't think I could, under those conditions."

He smiled. "Well, females are a little different than men. Besides, it was easy, Shelley girl. I just imagined it was you." He set her aside. "I want to get out of this hospital gown."

"Let me help you," she said quickly, pushing the gown over his broad shoulders.

He understood her need to help and allowed her to help him dress. Once dressed, Eric sat down and pulled Shelley into his lap.

"I have to tell you something." He leaned closer so that he could whisper. "I think I've communicated with Jeffy."

"What?" Shelley asked, rising up.

He pulled her back down, put his finger to his lips. "Telepathically. I'm pretty sure I got through. I could feel her. At least I think I could. Our Jeffy, she's a seer, a visionary, God's visionary, and her powerful, in-tune mind is reaching out to me."

Shelley listened as he explained the process he used. When he finished she felt her heart racing. "We have to try again."

"I agree. That's why I'm telling you. We'll do it together. Hold my hands and we'll try to contact her. If I can give her the information I was able to get out of these guys, they might be able to find us."

"Anything. I'll try anything."

He smiled at her. "Aww, my Shelley, have I told you lately just how much I love you?"

Shelley smiled at her husband. "With every breath you take."

He smiled. "Give me your hands. I don't know how much time we have before they come back. I heard them talking about actually bringing us some food."

✞✞✞

1 Samuel 9:9

"(Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to enquire of God,
thus he spake, Come, and let us go to the seer:
for he that is now called a Prophet was beforetime called a Seer.)"

Chapter Fourteen

They'd finished feeding the group which had grown by six people. Toby and Caroline's children, Grace and Brody Smith, and Keegan and Lizzy's eldest children, Heather, Rose and Violet Anderson. Kimmie Lee had been given leave from her mother's side and had also joined the group.

Jeffy had eaten in the office as she continued to work on the equation, her frustration growing. Jason informed her the FBI was not nearly as far along as she was, which was not good news, but also not surprising. She had some of the most brilliant minds in the world working with her on it. She felt confident that together they would solve it and she felt confident it wouldn't take much longer. The frustration came in thinking what her parents could be going through while she plays some stupid mind game.

Jeffy suddenly looked up. "What did you say?"

Cam turned from the window, his brow raised. "I didn't say anything, Jeffy. Maybe you need to take a break."

"I heard you say something."

"I didn't say anything," he repeated.

"Cam, I heard a man's voice plain as day."

"Well, it wasn't me."

Jeffy eyed him, knowing he was telling the truth. She jumped up. "We need to do another session."

They hurried out to the group who were clearing dishes and washing counters.

"Tell me you got it," Mark said when he saw her.

She shook her head. "Sorry. Not yet, but I think we need to do another session. If everyone doesn't want to help, I understand, but I'm hoping I can get as many as possible to help."

"What's happened?" Ricky asked. "Why suddenly?"

"I thought I heard Cam say something, but he didn't. It was a man's voice. I know I heard it. I'm not delusional. I'm thinking it was Dad.

Please, I have to try."

"I'm in," Joey said.

"Me too," Breez said.

"I think we're all in," Keegan said. "Front room everyone."

They kept with the same protocol. Again, as they prayed and meditated, the room grew warm. It took Jeffy only a few minutes before she started speaking.

"They're alive," she whispered, her voice cracking with the emotion. "They're together." She shook her head. "Something to do with genetics. Large facility. Black. Black. He keeps saying Black. Or maybe Payne. Dad is telling me to calm down. He knows I'm listening to him. He's trying to tell me what he's learned." She shook her head. "I can feel his emotions louder than I can hear the words he's trying to send out. He's excited. Tired. Hungry. He's worried about Mom. He's worried about us. Wait. He realizes his thoughts are too scattered. He's trying harder to concentrate. I, I see something. Looks like an infinity symbol. Yes, it's yellow. And there are letters. G-E-D-N-A. Black. Black. He's saying black is important. It's not a color."

"It's a name," Joey said.

Jeffy nodded. "Yes. It's a name. Black. And then the infinity symbol and GEDNA."

"A logo," Mark said. "And an acronym."

"Dad, listen to me. We're coming for you. Don't worry. We're coming for you."

She shook her head. "I don't think he can hear me. His mind is not as clear as before. He's tired. Someone else is there. They've brought them food. Dad has turned his attention away from me. Gotta go, baby girl," Jeffy said as if the words came straight from Eric's mouth. "Mom's okay. Stay strong. We'll be together soon."

Jeffy blinked several times as she lost contact. "I could feel them. Dad mostly, but I could feel Mom too. It was so weird. They're in some turmoil. The stress is getting to them. Dad is angry, I could feel it, but it wasn't directed at me."

"Well, we have some research to do," Keegan said.

"I need my computer at Ameritech," Joey said.

"No time, Joey. Just call it in to Jason," Keegan answered.

Joey nodded as he got on the phone and the others cleared out.

Cam knelt in front of Jeffy. "Hey, you did good."

She shook her head. "I thought I'd get more. I was so sure."

"You got a logo, a name, and possibly a company acronym. Man, Jeffy, that is fantastic. It won't be long now."

"Unless I don't figure out this equation."

He held out his hand. "Okay, let's get to it."



Taylor Kino stood in the doorway, watching and waiting for an opportunity to speak with Logan. She was sure he would think she was just flirting with him again, but this time she wasn't. She needed to ask someone some questions and he was the only one she thought would keep her confidence. Well, to be fair, anyone in her family would keep her confidence, but they would also know she was up to something and would restrict her to her mother's side if they figured out what she wanted to do.

When it looked like the girls were all going for a walk on the beach, Taylor made her move. She approached her sixteen-year-old cousin and touched his hand. "Logan?"

He smiled at her. "Hey Taylor. What's up?"

"Hey, um, so would you mind if I talk to you– privately?"

He frowned. "Taylor, if this... "

"Please."

He sighed. "Okay." He looked around. "You wanna walk out on the beach?"

"Okay."

They headed out the door. Once they passed the pool and the garden, they followed an elaborate boardwalk that took them easily over the deeper sand to the harder packed beach. They automatically turned north, walking slowly.

"Okay, Taylor," Logan said. "What's this all about?"

"Do you ever feel like, frustrated? I mean, like you want to do something to help, but you can't do anything?"

He smiled. "Yeah, sure. That's pretty much how everyone is feeling right now. Is that how you're feeling?"

She nodded. "It's making me crazy. Let me ask you this– if you found out there was something you could do to help, would you do it?"

"Of course. In a flash. Do you know of something I could do?"

"No. I'm just saying, if there was something, you probably wouldn't even hesitate, would you?"

"Well, I hope I wouldn't."

Taylor sighed. "You know, a whole lot of people say that I look just like Aunt Jeffy."

Logan stopped walking, looked her over. "Yeah, you do. I mean, of course you do. Your mom is Grandma's daughter and your dad is Granddad's son. Of course you're gonna look a lot like Jeffy, but still, you

look like you too."

"Yeah, I look like me, but I do look a lot like Jeffy, don't I?"

Logan shrugged. "I just said you do."

"I mean, Aunt Jeffy, she's so beautiful."

"So are you, Taylor. Is that what this is all about? You want to know if you're as pretty as Aunt Jeffy?"

"Uh, yeah. Some people say we could pass for twins."

He nodded. "Except she's taller than you. And your hair is not quite as curly as Jeffy's."

Taylor grabbed a lock of her long, dark hair. Nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah." She smiled, rose up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Logan. You're the best."

Before he could answer, she took off running toward the house.



Jeffy slipped the piece of paper in her sock before she pushed back away from the desk.

Cam immediately looked up. "You okay?"

"I'm just so tired. My brain is burned out. Maybe if I get a good night's sleep I'll be able to figure this out first thing in the morning."

Cam's brow furrowed before he nodded his head. "Yeah, maybe that's exactly what you need."

Jeffy rose from the desk, stretched her arms over her head. "Think I'll go in the kitchen and grab a snack. Would you like something?"

"Sure. Whatever you're having."

"Okay. Be right back. So, maybe you could get our super duper deluxe mattress out and pumped up?"

"Will do," Cam agreed. He waited for her to close the door before he went to the desk and looked over her work. As far as he could tell, she'd gotten further. Several pages further apparently, but not far enough. Still, he thought she was acting strange. He quickly shook the mattress out on the floor, turned on the air pump and headed to the kitchen to see if he could discern what she was up to.

Jeffy looked up at him as he entered. "Mattress all ready?"

"Uh, almost. Thought you might need some help."

"No, I got it. I'll be right there."

Nodding, he watched her for a moment, then headed back to the office, turned off the pump and threw the sheets and blankets over the mattress. Turning quickly, he was heading back out the office door and practically ran into Jeffy as she was headed into the room with a tray.

"Oh!" Jeffy said, holding the tray up so the milk wouldn't spill. "Where

are you rushing to?"

"I was, uh, just coming to see what was taking you so long."

"It didn't take me that long," Jeffy said casually. "What's wrong with you? You're acting strange."

"Strange?" Cam said. "Just a little on edge I guess." He reached for the tray. "Let me get that for you."

Jeffy allowed him to take the tray. He placed it on the desk, carefully eyeing the contents. "Oooo, you found leftover chocolate cake. Very cool."

"Miss Maddie put some away for me for later since I didn't have any after dinner," she said with a smile. "I brought a piece for you."

She handed him the plate. He took it but frowned down at it.

"What's the matter? Didn't you like it?"

"Oh, yeah, just, I'm not sure I feel like eating it."

Jeffy shrugged. "You did say you wanted to have whatever I'm having, didn't you?"

"Oh. Yeah." He took a small bite. He realized he was acting strange and that was because he had a feeling Jeffy had solved the equation. A strong feeling. Otherwise, she wouldn't be stopping to treat herself to chocolate cake. For some reason, she felt more at ease. She felt relaxed enough to eat. A celebration of sorts.

"Here ya go," she said, handing him one of the glasses of milk. He took it, looked it over, smelled it and took a small sip. He had visions of what Bree had done to Jeff Davis all those years ago when he'd been assigned as her bodyguard. She'd slipped Rohypnol into his lemonade and left him sleeping on the beach while she went to face down the bad guys alone. No way was Jeffy gonna get one over on him. He watched as she gobbled down her cake and drank all her milk. "You must've been hungry," Cam said.

"Guess so," she answered. "Are you gonna eat?"

"Actually, I was thinking of another kind of dessert," he said softly.

Smiling, Jeffy eyed the door. Cam rose and locked it, went to her and offered his hand. When she took it, he pulled her up, wrapped his arm around her waist and brought her snug against his body.

"I love you, Jeffy," he said softly, looking into her eyes.

She placed her hand against his strong jaw and rubbed against the stiff bristles from him not having shaved in a few days. "I love you too, Cam. I really do. I want you to know that no matter what happens, I love you and I always will."

He had to smile. For being so smart, she was so transparent. He wasn't sure how she expected to sneak away, but he was gonna be on her like glue. He decided to distract her a bit. "You love me, huh?" he whispered,

nuzzling her cheek with his lips.

"Ummm, yes, with all my heart."

"But not enough to marry me?"

She looked up quickly, realizing he was serious. "Please don't think that, Cam. Yes, I love you enough to marry you."

"I don't understand. You said you couldn't marry me."

"I'm sorry. I haven't had time to explain it to you, but I swear I will. Just not tonight, Cam. Not now. I have so much on my mind."

"I'm gonna take your mind off some of those things."

"Can you? Will you?"

He circled around behind her, began to massage her shoulders. "You have a lot of tension here," he murmured as he dug his thumbs into the sensitive spots beside her shoulder blades. She sighed. He moved close, brushed her hair away from her neck and gently kissed her there, lingering and tasting.

She leaned back against him, resting her head against his strong shoulder. "Do you think it's wrong that I want you?" she asked. "I mean, with who knows what happening to my parents right now and all I can think of is being as close to you as I can get?"

"You need comfort. You need release."

"I need you, Cameron," she whispered.

"I know. Look up," he said.

She lifted her head and realized they were standing just in front of the large mirror across from the desk. Her hair streamed down in front on one side while Cam's lips were pressed to her other cheek. His eyes were open, watching her as she was now watching him.

Her fingers worked the buttons of her shirt. He stopped her. He could just see a small part of her bra that did not have sex in mind when it was designed. More likely it was designed by a ten-year-old for it was white with yellow smiley faces all over it.

"Sexy," he said with a chuckle.

She giggled. "It was Taylor's. All my stuff that was packed in my bag was dirty. It's a little small, but we're close to the same size."

"I don't want to talk about Taylor right now," he growled.

Jeffy smiled. "Why not? I wasn't much older than her when I asked you to have sex with me."

"And we didn't do it then and we are not doing it now."

She closed her eyes. "Cameron Wallace, didn't you just say you were gonna give me comfort?"

"No, I said you needed comfort. I didn't say I was gonna give it to you. Not in the way you had in mind, anyway."

"Why can't you be like you were all those years ago. I suggested we have sex and it took you all of three seconds to agree."

"Come on, now, I was a seventeen-year-old horny teenager being offered sex by the hottest girl in the world. I was only human. Tonight though, Jeffy, I'm different than I was back then. I'm no longer a randy teenager. I'm a man in complete control of my body. And as much as I want you, it's not right and I know you know that."

"I can't believe you don't want me."

"Oh, Jeffy, you are amazingly beautiful and I do want you. But remember, I want you forever. Not for a quick release."

He continued to rub her shoulders and neck as they looked in the mirror, almost trance-like. When her eyes drifted shut, he kissed her back, between her shoulder blades. They didn't speak anymore. She turned into his arms. He lifted her and carried her to the air mattress where he settled her down in the curve of his body. They both fell immediately to sleep.



Ricky came instantly awake. He'd received a text. Maybe Jeffy had worked on the equation all night and finally solved it. He grabbed up his phone from the night stand and read the message.

He ground out an expletive as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood.

"What's wrong?" Bree asked sleepily.

He thought about telling her to go back to sleep, it was nothing, but he only thought that because it'd taken her forever to finally fall asleep. However, they'd made a pact as a family and she deserved the truth.

"Read the message on my phone," Ricky said as he pulled on jeans and a black t-shirt.

Bree focused her eyes on the message.

She's moving fast. No time to text. Details later.

"This is from Cam? Who's the 'she'? Is he talking about Jeffy?" Bree said, her voice rising in pitch.

"Yes. Thank goodness she wasn't able to give him the slip. I'm going down to the office to see if she left any clues."

"What do you mean, give him the slip? What is she trying to do?" Bree asked.

Ricky took Bree by the shoulders. "Okay, sweetheart, you gotta calm down. I need a clear head. Apparently Jeffy solved the equation and went to the meeting place without telling anyone."

Bree gasped. "Why? Why would she do that?"

"Because the letter said if she involved anyone we would never see

Shelley and Dad again. She's trying to protect them."

"Oh, no, oh, no," Bree said, pulling on a robe as she paced back and forth.

"I need you to stay calm and help me, okay?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. "It's like when she was seven and Tommy Crane took her from Mom."

"Feels the same, I know. Hopefully *is* the same," he said.

"What are you talking about?" she practically screamed.

He smiled. "Because she promised me she'd wear Jason's GPS ankle bracelet."

"I thought you weren't gonna involve Jason."

Ricky shrugged. "Needed a fail-safe."

Bree blew out a breath, wiped at her tears.

"I'll be in the office. I need you to wake Joey and Mark without waking the rest of the house, if possible and send them to me."

She nodded.

❁

Joey, trained to become alert immediately, grabbed up his phone and sprang from the bed. It was his boss on the line.

"To the point, Agent Adams. I realize you all intended to leave Ameritech out of the picture, but I cannot return the favor. Our sweet Jeffy has solved the equation and taken off to rendezvous with your parents' abductors."

"Dammit."

"She thinks she's alone but Cam is on her tail."

Joey blew out a relieved breath as he pulled his pants on and reached into the closet for his bag. "So, Cam called you?"

"No. Cam was true to the family he will soon be a part of. I had Kimmie keeping an eye on Jeffy. She was a little more loyal to me."

"It wasn't a matter of loyalty, Jason," Joey started.

"Later," Jason said. "I have a GPS reading on Jeffy. Gather whomever you had plans to gather when this time came and get a move on."

"Yes sir." Joey pushed the end button and slipped his phone in his pocket. Tossing his bag on the bed, he pulled his weapon, checked the ammo, strapped on his shoulder holster and holstered the weapon.

"What's happening?" Breez asked, her voice thick with sleep.

"Jeffy's on the move. Gotta go, baby."

Breez gasped, sprang from the bed, pushing her shiny black curls out of her face.

"Shh," Joey said softly. "You'll wake the girls."

She threw her arms around her husband. "Joey, please be careful."

"I will be."

"And bring them all home safe and sound," she added.

"I will." He bent his head and kissed her hard, with all the love he felt, always knowing in his job, it could be the last time.

She hugged him hard, letting her love, her passion for him make him strong. He pulled away at the soft knock on the door.

He opened it to find Bree standing there.

"Jeffy's gone," Bree began.

Grabbing his bag, he stepped out of the room. "I know. Where's Ricky?"

❁

Keeping the house asleep had been impossible. Yet, even though most everyone was up, the place was nearly silent. Currently the only sound was the heavy metal clink of weapons being checked.

Maddie padded around the kitchen, making coffee, tea, anything to be of help. Lizzy Tanner stood nearby, her face stoic. Her husband was a hero and she had no doubt that between him and the rest of this group of warriors, they would come back with Jeffy, Eric and Shelley. Mickey Davis felt likewise.

Ricky, Mark, Joey, Keegan and Jeff were ready to go. Chaz Stewart and John Appel, having once been military, would be going along as the designated drivers. Ricky nodded at Toby Nash.

Toby nodded back. "I promise the boys and I will safeguard your loved ones."

Ricky eyed the six teenage boys standing just inside the kitchen doorway. Young Eric, JoJo, Logan, Jake, Gabriel and Toby's son, Brody. He was sure a finer group of young men could not be found.

Ricky's phone rang. Seeing it was Cam, he answered and put it on speaker. It was difficult to make out what he was saying with the roar of the custom-built motorcycle he was on.

"They have her. Picked her up in Anaheim. We're headed east on SR91 toward Corona. She took the Stewarts' rental, left it in Anaheim. Oh, and there's a paparazzo tied up just outside the gate. He wanted to follow Jeffy. I had to convince him otherwise. I'll make contact when I know more."

The call ended at the same time Joey's phone rang.

"Put me on speaker," Jason said.

Joey did as instructed.

"I'll be handling the communications from here and I have a reading on Jeffy's GPS ankle bracelet. You guys get on the road. Keegan you can

tell your buddies, namely Tristan, Brayden and Kaleb that I'm now in the loop and to tune in to my communication. What is their current location?"

Keegan cleared his throat almost in apology. "They are down the road at a roach motel."

"Thank you. Moving on. We've been working on the information Jeffy provided yesterday. There's thousands of businesses with the infinity sign as a logo. Most of them are yellow in color. GEDNA is not coming up in our database, so I will be involving our friends at the Bureau. Get on the road and do me a favor. Kimmie is not answering her cell phone. Ask her to come home, please. Angel is having a bit of a hard time."

The entire group looked around, realizing Kimmie was nowhere to be found.

"Boys?" Ricky said.

The boys immediately took off in different directions, searching the house for Kimmie.

"Hello?" Jason said.

"Uh, Jason, Kimmie's not here. We're searching the house now, but no one has seen her," Ricky answered.

"Hold on," Jason said.

They could hear the buttons clicking on his computer.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit," Jason muttered. "I've pulled up her GPS signal in her cell phone. She's moving east on 91."

"She's following Jeffy?"

"Apparently."

"Cam should see her."

Jason was silent a moment, piecing the puzzle together. "Unless she's behind him."

"Or," Joey put in, "unless she's trying to pass herself off as Jeffy and got in one of those four Yukons."

"I'm gonna lock that girl up and throw away the key," Jason said. "Angel is gonna go bonkers."

"Yeah, Jensen too," Joey added.

"We'll come get Angel," Jodi Appel said quickly. "We'll bring her here and take care of her."

"Thanks. I'll be in touch." Jason ended the call.

Ricky looked to Bree, intending to kiss her goodbye when he saw her furrowed brow. "What is it, baby?"

Bree looked around the room. "Where's Taylor?"

Ricky looked to young Eric but his son shook his head. "She's not in the theater room. No one is." He gestured around at the group at large. "We're all right here. I thought she'd gone to your room to sleep," young

Eric said, his voice shaking.

"No!" Bree said, the panic rising. "She's not in our room."

"Oh, no," Logan said softly.

"What is it, son?" Mark asked him, noting his pale face. "It's okay. Just tell us what you know."

"She, uh, she came to me last night. Asked me what I would do if I knew I could do something to help with the situation. I told her," he stopped, ran his hand over his hair. "I told her if I thought I could do something I would do it without hesitation. She asked me if I thought she looked like Jeffy. I thought she wanted to know if I thought she was pretty. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I think I told her she could pass as Jeffy's twin."

Bree started to cry.

"I'm sorry," Logan said. "I didn't realize what she was thinking."

"It's not your fault," Mark stated firmly. "We're all responsible for our own actions." He nodded toward the others. "Boys, search the house to make sure she's not here."

Once again the teen boys took off. A few minutes later they came back without Taylor; however, Eric had a piece of paper. He handed it to his father. "Found this on her air mattress."

Ricky took the note and read aloud.

"Mom, Dad, don't be mad. I know you think I'm just a kid and all I'm good for is watching the little ones. But I'm gonna try to make them think I'm Jeffy. I'm gonna get in one of those cars. I'm hoping that somehow I can beat her to the cars and everyone takes off without her. Maybe it will keep Jeffy safe. She's important to keep safe. Maybe I won't make it in time and it will only confuse the bad guys. At least Jeffy won't be alone. I need to do this. I couldn't stand the thought of Jeffy facing these people alone. I know you all intend to follow close behind, but this way, I'll be right there with her. I'm not afraid. Mom, I had to do this. I look so much like her. I'm not worried. Dad, by the time this crazy dude realizes he has the wrong person, I know you'll be there. I love you all so much. When I get back you can put me on restriction or whatever you want. It felt important that I do what I can to help Jeffy and Grandma and Granddad.

Love always and forever ♡

Taylor

P.S. In case you're wondering where the Stewarts' rental car is, I saw Jeffy snatch the keys at dinner. I'm gonna hide in the back seat!"

Bree clutched her stomach. "Oh my baby, what have you done?" she cried. "It doesn't even make sense! How can she beat her to the cars if she's in the same car as Jeffy? She's not thinking clearly."

Ricky grabbed her, scooped her up before she could fall over and sat her down on a chair. Kneeling in front of her, he squeezed her hand. "Okay, Bree, we're gonna bring her back. You trusted us to get Jeffy and Shelley and Dad, right? So you gotta trust us to get Taylor too. I swear it. I'll bring her back."

Tears ran down her face. "Taylor, oh, Taylor."

Ricky gave her a soft shake. "Bree, look at me."

Her eyes focused on his.

"I'll bring her back."

She nodded.

"We gotta go," Keegan said softly.

Ricky rose and immediately the women closed ranks around Bree.

❁

"What do you mean, you have her? Car Two already has her."

"I was at the rendezvous point and this woman opened the door and got in and I took off," said the driver of the third car.

Julian Black rose from his chair and began to pace the expanse of his luxurious office. "Describe her to me."

The driver turned and eyed his passenger through the bulletproof glass that separated him from the back seat."She's about five foot four to five six, long, black, wavy hair, dark eyes. A looker for sure. I mean, she looks like the pics of Dr. Kino."

"And so does Gaff's passenger." He sighed. "Fine. Take her to point B and follow procedure. When you get there, send me a picture." He hung up and walked to the window of his office, staring out over the dark mountainside. He didn't have time to even consider the new information before Car One called in. Turning, he slapped his hand on the speaker button. "Report."

"I have her, sir. We're on the way to point B."

Julian Black let out a string of profanity.

"Sir?"

"Describe her to me."

"Medium height, nice body, long, dark hair, dark eyes. Maybe a slight Asian or Polynesian look to her. Looks exactly like the picture you showed us of Dr. Kino."

"Yeah, well, we'll just see how exact. Gaff and Packer also have a passenger with the same description. Proceed to point B. Send me a picture

of your passenger when you get there."

He hung up, called Gaff.

"Yeah," Gaff answered.

"Both Wagner and Packer have a passenger with the same description. When they get there, follow the same procedure. Once you know they're clean, put them in your car and bring them all to me. Send Wagner and Packer in different directions with the girls' personal effects. These people think they can play games with me. They will soon see that I mean business."

"Got it."

"And remember, do not come in through the front gate. Take the road to the back of the mountain tunnel entrance."

"But that's at least five miles more out of the way."

"Yes, it is, and it's that way for a reason. Just do it and don't question me."

"Yes sir."

He ended the call, his body vibrating with anger. Who did Gaff think he was, second guessing him? Once again he went to the window to look out at the darkness.

He had a temper. His mother always told him it was his Latin blood, but he believed it was simply a matter of being impatient with the rest of humanity. That and possibly never receiving the respect and admiration he so deserved. Oh, he was respected for his wealth– money talks. He was respected by his employees, because he had the potential to take them from rags to riches and back again on his whim. Yet, he'd been denied the respect of the medical world. That was about to change. His work as a geneticist was leaps and bounds above what anyone had accomplished.

Dr. Kino was the only one who could even be considered close to his same level. An evolved creature, with an evolved brain. And beauty to match. Only *he* understood her true worth and only he would know what it truly meant to lose her; however, her mind had been poisoned by this need to do good, to save the masses from their pitiful little selves. Let them kill themselves off. Let the species evolve. With her by his side, they held in their hands the means to repopulate the world with beautiful, intelligent geniuses. A higher species. One he would create using his knowledge of genetics and her amazing DNA. *Their* amazing DNA.

He'd calmed somewhat. That was a good thing for his prisoners downstairs, because he'd first thought he would wake Payne and allow him to do his thing. Torture, maim, rape, break bones, inflict pain. Black drew a deep breath. No. Not yet. He would first see just who was in those cars.



The SUV driven by John Appel sped along the highway. Inside, Joey, Mark, Ricky and Jeff Davis rode, the latter three quietly listening to the current conversation on their earpieces. "You can pull back," Joey said loudly to Cam. "Jason's in the mix and he has Jeffy on GPS."

"I might pull back some but I'm not taking my eyes off Jeffy. Period."

Joey nodded. He completely understood and appreciated Cam's attitude. "Well you need to pull back some," Joey urged, "because there is at least one car behind you holding another hostage."

"What? Who?" Cam yelled.

"Jason has a GPS signal on Kimmie's phone. She's missing and he's picking up her signal a mile or so back of you."

"What the hell?"

"Trying to play the hero is my guess, by attempting to pass herself off as Jeffy."

"That makes no sense. If she's following Jeffy, she has to know Jeffy will get in one of those cars. What good will she be doing?"

"Right? Who knows what she's thinking. Maybe just trying to stay with her, or trying to confuse the situation."

"Well, she's accomplishing that. Okay, I'm backing off, I'll see if I can get visual on both cars."

"There's more. We think Taylor might be in one of the cars too."

Cam tapped the mic in the side of his helmet. "Come again, Joe, can't hear you. Sounded like you said Taylor was in the car. Are you talking about Agent Taylor?"

"No. Taylor. My niece, Ricky's daughter."

"Oh man," Cam muttered. "How's Ricky taking this?"

"He's very quiet."

"Yeah, I bet. Is she in the car with Kimmie or in a third car?"

"Well, we just don't know. Probably in a separate car. She left a note stating her intention to pass herself off as Jeffy."

Cam downshifted. "They're slowing down ahead. Looks like they're getting off I-10 in Beaumont. I'm backing off, watching for Kimmie and Taylor. How far back are you?"

"We're about thirty minutes behind you. Don't lose them. We're depending on you, Cam."

"I get that," he said, as he downshifted again. "Pulling over to a side street. Will try to stay parallel with the motorcade. Still don't see another Yukon yet. Could take a few minutes. I'll circle arou—ugh!"

Joey listened to the roar of Cam's bike, some thumping and bumping.

"Cam?" Joey waited a few seconds. "Cam."

In the second car driven by Chaz Stewart, Keegan blew out a breath as he listened in. He shook his head. "He's down."

"Cam, come in," Joey continued. When he didn't answer, Joey switched to Jason's communication. "Jason, you got this?"

"I got it," Jason said quietly. "He's down."



Taylor thought she'd be calm. Brave. So why was her body trembling so hard she could barely hold still? Maybe it was her subconscious mind recognizing the danger of her situation. She'd actually been calm up until a few minutes ago when the dude left the highway, turned down a side street and was headed around the backside of a small, dirty-looking motel.

Taylor didn't have much experience with this. She'd been pampered most of her life. Her family had never stayed anywhere where the street lights didn't shine brightly and the room didn't smell clean and fresh. They'd roughed it on some camping trips and Taylor had enjoyed the nitty-gritty business of camping, but that really wasn't the same as arriving at a nasty looking motel with a man who could end up being her murderer or the murderer of her grandparents. She wondered if this was where they were being held.

The SUV pulled up next to another one exactly like it. The driver got out. Taylor tried to open her door and realized it was a childproof lock. She waited for the man to come around and let her out. The moment he opened her door he grabbed her by the arm, squeezing tight and jerked her from the car.

"Ow," Taylor complained. "I'm not going anywhere. You don't have to break my arm."

The man eased off and pushed her toward the door with the number 116 painted on the front. The door opened and Taylor was shoved inside. She tried to hide her surprise when she saw her Aunt Jeffy sitting in a chair against the far wall, a man kneeling in front of her, wrapping her wrists in nylon cable ties.

"Taylor, what are *you* doing here?" Taylor said quickly.

Jeffy rolled her eyes. "Very funny, Taylor. I guess I should ask you the same question." She eyed the man who bound her wrists. "This girl is my niece. She's pretending to be me. You need to let her go. Send her back. She wasn't part of the deal."

"Shut up," the man barked.

"Gaff," Taylor's driver said with a smile. "You seem a little on edge. Try taking a few deep breaths."

"Shut up, Packer, or I'll shut you up."

Packer shrugged, then pushed Taylor down to sit on the bed, took out his phone and held it up. "Smile for the camera," he said before he snapped the picture and forwarded it to his boss.

"She isn't Dr. Kino," Gaff said. "Black has already confirmed that this one is her," he said, jerking his thumb back at Jeffy.

Packer shrugged. "So, what does he want me to do with this one? Cuz I can think of a few things right off the bat."

Taylor drew a fearful breath as she grasped his meaning.

"Don't you touch her. She's just a kid," Jeffy said, her voice fierce.

"Doesn't look too much like a kid to me."

"Shut up," Gaff barked. "Black wants me to take all three of them back with me. He wants you and Wagner to go on the decoy routes with their stuff."

"Three?"

The door burst open and Kimmie was shoved through the door.

"Kimmie?" Jeffy said.

"Why are you calling me Kimmie? You're Kimmie," Kimmie said.

"Oh, Kimmie you adorable idiot," Jeffy said lovingly. "They know who I am. This Mr. Black guy knows everything about me. Don't you think he would recognize me instantly? Did you talk Taylor into this ridiculous scheme?"

"I swear, I wouldn't do that. I didn't know Taylor was gonna try to come along."

"Enough," Gaff said. "We don't have a lot of time." He motioned at Kimmie and Taylor. "Take off your jewelry, your hair clips, your watch," he said pointedly to Kimmie. "Rings, earrings, bracelets, necklaces, everything."

Kimmie frowned at him. "You're gonna rob us?"

The man reached out and grabbed Kimmie by the front of her shirt. "Shut up and take them off or I'll take them off for you."

"Kimmie!" Jeffy yelled quickly, recognizing her stance to strike. "Just do what they say. I need to get to Mom and Dad."

Kimmie blew out a reluctant breath. She'd rather fight any day. "Fine," she said sharply, as she began removing her earrings.

The jewelry was placed in a small pile on the bed.

"Now shoes and socks," Gaff ordered.

Taylor complied immediately. Kimmie took time to roll her eyes before she kicked off her shoes. "Those are three-hundred-dollar shoes," she complained.

"Okay, hands against the wall, ladies," Gaff said, a smile finally

crossing his face.

Taylor couldn't help the tears that suddenly sprang to her eyes. She did as told, squeezing her eyes shut as the man ran his hands over her body. He found her cell phone in her hip pocket and tossed it into the growing pile.

"It's okay, Taylor," Jeffy comforted quietly. "Just a body, right?"

Taylor looked up at her Aunt, nodded slowly, trying to remember her father's and grandfather's teachings. Still, she was grateful when he finished and shoved her down to sit on the bed.

He wasn't so quick with Kimmie, prodding and probing, causing a small wince to come from Kimmie's throat. Kimmie didn't fight, but she did smile up at the man when he was finished. "I'm pretty sure you're gonna die for that," she said, thrilling when his face darkened with anger.

"Your turn," Gaff said as he pulled Jeffy up from the chair. She wore no visible jewelry so he shoved her against the wall and searched her. She was pleased to see they weren't interested in her removing her shoes and socks. She tried not to think about the hands groping her body. It was only a body after all. They couldn't touch her mind. She hoped Taylor had learned that lesson, even though her young niece's tears proved otherwise.

Jeffy thought he was finished with her, when he motioned toward her feet. "Take off your shoes and socks."

"My feet get cold," Jeffy argued.

He didn't ask her again. He merely pushed her back onto the bed, grabbed her feet and pulled them off.

"Well, what have we here?" he said, examining the anklet she wore. Carefully, he unfastened the clasp and removed the piece of jewelry, dashing Jeffy's hopes of leading her rescuers to them.

Gaff handed the anklet to Wagner. "You take this one and head for the due north route. Packer, you take the rest of the junk and head back northwest to LA."

Packer eyed the females. "Amazing how much they look alike." He grinned. "There's three of them. There's three of us. Sure you don't want to have a little fun first?"

Taylor's eyes filled. The man moved close to Kimmie. "What about you, sweetheart?" he said, touching his finger to her chest.

"Your friend, Gaff there, he's already a dead man twice over. You wanna join him?" Kimmie said with a smirk.

Packer laughed. "Twice over huh? How you figure?"

"First, for touching Taylor. She's Ricky Kino's daughter and he could tear your heart out quickly and easily. And second, for touching me, cuz my father owns Ameritech and my boyfriend is an agent and both of them have amazing tempers. I'm gonna bet it's my father that gets to you first. No,

actually, I just realized who will get to you first. You touch Jeffy and your own boss man will murder you before my father ever has the chance."

The man backed away. "This chick is crazy," he muttered.

Gaff smiled, held out more cable ties. "Secure their wrists and help me get them in my car."



"They were together for those few minutes but they've split up again," Jason said. "Kimmie's GPS signal is headed back toward you, Rick. I want you to stand back and intercept."

"And Jeffy?" Ricky asked.

"Keegan's car will stay on her signal. I'm thinking they met together in Beaumont, figured out which one was Jeffy, took her on and sent Kimmie and Taylor back. Thought you would like the chance to intercept your daughter," Jason explained.

Ricky ran a hand over his hair. This was a freaking nightmare. His sister and parents in jeopardy in one place, his daughter, Taylor, in another. Or so Jason was assuming. And Jason's daughter, Kim, was also in peril and she was possibly with Taylor. Jason was actually having to depend on the people in this car to rescue both girls.

"Okay," Ricky said softly to Joey.

"We're on it," Joey finally said to Jason.

"Thank you. I have Brayden, and Kaleb searching for Cam and I'm dispatching a chopper. Keegan's car is on Jeffy's GPS trail. Your time of interception is nine minutes. Get in position."

John got off at the next exit, swung over the bridge and eased down onto the entrance ramp to wait for Jason's next transmission. The car was quiet, which for the Kinos was a sign of extreme control.

"Intercept in fifteen seconds," Jason said.

Mark looked back through the window. At three in the morning, all he could see were lights of cars. Thank goodness there weren't too many of them.

"Start moving," Jason said.

John eased the car down the entrance ramp, picked up speed.

"He's on top of you," Jason said.

John floored it, easily catching up to the black Yukon and pulling in behind the vehicle.

"No passengers visible," Joey reported once they'd followed for a few minutes.

Ricky thought his heart would explode. It's possible his daughter was right there in front of him. All he could do was follow and eventually

secure the vehicle and whoever was inside. They couldn't force it off the road for fear of injuring the girls, if they were in there. They could be tied up on the floor or lying down in the seats. His mind tried to wander to telling his wife that Taylor was– no– stop it. Taylor was fine. She would be home safe and sound soon, along with Jeffy and Kimmie and Dad and Shelley. She was fine.

But why? Why did she pull this stunt? Was it possible he hadn't been giving her enough attention? Did she feel she needed to prove something to her parents? Why did she have to make this statement? He thought of her remark about babysitting. It was true. It was so easy to ask her to watch the kids while the adults worked on more important things. He was sorry they'd made her feel unimportant. Hopefully, he would soon be able to remedy the situation.

It seemed they rode forever when it was probably only a few minutes. The Yukon pulled off the interstate and headed west, toward the coast. They were relieved when it seemed to be coming to a halt outside a sleazy dive. Within seconds of the man exiting the Yukon, Joey had him detained and Ricky and Mark searched the Yukon, finding the pile of jewelry, shoes and cell phones, which would include Kimmie's GPS.

"You have about ten minutes to get information out of him before the Feds arrive," Jason said.

Ricky looked at Joey. "You want me to do it?"

Jeff, Joey and Mark remembered back fifteen years earlier, when they'd watched Ricky extract information from a man who'd broken into their home. They nodded to Ricky. "Go for it."

Ricky took out his hunting knife. The man, who was being held by Joey, began to struggle in fear. Ricky shook his head and put the large knife back in its sheath at his side. It took up an extra few seconds but the intimidation factor was important. Instead, he took out his pocketknife, raising the thin blade and looking it over. "Hold his head," Ricky ordered.

Mark placed him in a headlock to allow Ricky to insert the knife up inside the man's nose.

"One false move and the blade goes up into the eye socket, or farther, into the brain. It's up to you. Do you understand? Don't nod, just speak very slowly."

"Yes," the man said, his voice filled with fear.

"What's your name?"

"Roy. Roy Packer."

"Okay, Roy, you're gonna tell me where the girls are and then everything will be okay. Do you understand?"

"Yes," the man squeaked.

"Start talking."

"They, they're with Gaff. He's headed back to the compound."

"Where's the compound?"

"I– I don't know."

Ricky nudged the knife upward.

"Oh, God, I don't know," the man said, tears forming in his eyes. "I swear. I've never been there. I just know it's somewhere in northern Arizona and it's a ten-hour drive. Only certain people get to know where the boss man is."

"Who's the boss man?"

Packer was silent. Ricky probed the knife up a little farther and blood oozed from the man's nose.

"He'll kill me," Packer cried.

"Answer the questions, Roy Packer, unless you want this knife to accidentally slip up into your eye socket."

"We call him Dr. Black. I don't know a first name."

"Are my parents being held at this compound?" Ricky asked.

"Yeah. They're there. That's all I know. You gotta believe me," he said as Ricky twisted the knife slightly.

"What did you do to the girls when you stopped earlier?"

"We didn't hurt them. I swear. We just took their stuff, you know? We searched them and took their stuff. That's all. I took some and Wagner took some. We're the decoys. We put the women in Gaff's car and he's driving them to the compound."

"Women? One of them was just a little girl. A little girl! Did you touch my daughter?"

The man choked down a sob.

Ricky leaned closer. "Did you touch my daughter?"

"No. I swear."

"It doesn't feel like you're telling me the truth," Ricky said as he moved the knife.

The man whimpered. "We thought about it, but we didn't. I swear. We just took their stuff."

"Company," Jeff said quietly.

Ricky removed the knife, smiled at the man. "Thank you, Roy. You did real good."

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Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you
and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Chapter Fifteen

Ricky thought he would go crazy before he heard from Jason again. Mark and Joey thought the same thing. Keegan and Chaz had stopped the other Yukon and Jeffy's GPS ankle bracelet was found in the driver's pocket. So, that meant the girls were in a third vehicle heading to somewhere in northern Arizona.

They didn't dare put out an APB for the Yukon the girls traveled in, for fear of putting Eric and Shelley in danger. So, they all drove into Arizona and headed northwest.

Cam had not been found, but the motel room where the girls had been taken had been located and was being processed by the FBI.

Back at the house, Jodi did her best to keep the women focused on a positive outcome while Maddie soothed everyone's nerves with food and kindness. While young Eric was doing his best to comfort his mom, the other teenagers were doing their best to help young Eric, as he was feeling very responsible for not keeping track of his sister.

By the time Jason finally contacted the men, the sun was high in the sky. "Get your heads right, boys, we're going in," Jason said brightly.

"Spill it," Ricky urged.

"FBI got a hit on the infinity logo. There's a very secretive and very high-tech genetics lab tucked away in the northeast corner of Arizona. Word has it that most of the building is underground, built in the side of a mountain. Finally tracked down the name of the place, GEDNAR. Stands for Genetics Engineering DNA Research. Jeffy had it right, except she missed the R. That kept throwing it out of the system. The company is privately owned and funded by American billionaire, Julian Black, who is renowned as a genius in genetics. Records show he has been at many of the high IQ conferences and functions that Jeffy would have attended over the years."

"How far away are we?" Ricky asked.

"The place is located in the mountains east of Round Rock, Arizona. By car it would take you at least four more hours. I've had two choppers in the air and I'm sending one of them to pick you all up at the Tuba City municipal airport in about fifteen minutes. Once you're in the air, I'll brief you. FBI will be moving in too, but I have their okay to send my agents in covertly to find and protect the hostages. That means, Ricky and Mark, you are deputized as my agents and will be on my payroll. Don't mess up and accidentally kill someone. Unless of course, it's in self-defense."

"Don't want revenge, Jason," Ricky said calmly. "Just want my family back and that includes Kimmie."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"Just want you to know that I realize it must be difficult for you right now, having to fight the need to be here to get your daughter back. I want to assure you she's just as high a priority for us as everyone else."

Jason blew out a breath. "Thank you. It is a fight, but I know I'm in the best place to help her. Agent Deal is on the chopper. He's the one going bonkers."

"We'll do our best to keep him calm."

While they drove to the airport in Tuba City, John got on the phone and gave Jodi the update, knowing she would know just the right way to let everyone know what was going down.

❁

Julian Black smoothed back his black hair, checking for stray grays, which he'd recently taken care of with his *Men Only* treatment. He stood tall, turned sideways to check his profile and to make sure his black suit fell perfectly on his form.

He smiled. He was fit and trim and hardly looked a day over thirty. Some of that was due to his excellent daily regimen, but most was breeding. His line was extremely pure, of that he was certain. Preliminary tests on June Flower's parents also showed some amazing DNA traits. So much so that he was tempted to use the eggs and sperm he'd harvested to create a few more Kino children. He'd keep that option in reserve.

For now, he had three beautiful young women waiting in his outer office to meet him. One of them was his heart's desire, June Flower Kino. Together, they would create a line of DNA superior to all others. Pasting a smile on his face, he licked his thumb, smoothed his mustache and headed through the door.

He stopped just on the other side, allowing them to look him over. His man, Gaff, stood next to June Flower who sat tall in the red velvet Queen Anne armchair, looking like the royalty she was. The other two sat side by

side on the small antique settee. All three had their wrists bound with nylon cable and all three young ladies looked up at him when he entered the office. The youngest's eyes were fearful. The Korean girl's eyes reflected extreme anger, and then there was June Flower. She appeared calm and inquisitive. How– very– perfect.

He smiled at her. In person she was even more beautiful than he'd thought. Her full lips, her warm, gentle eyes.

"Ladies," he said as he approached.

"Think again," Kimmie responded.

He glared at her. "Ah, yes, the feisty one. You fancy yourself a tough girl. I don't think you'll think that way by the time we get through with you."

Taylor gasped at his words and Jeffy stood. "You said you wanted me. I'm here. You may *not* hurt my friend."

He thought for a moment. Nodded. "Very well. I will see that she is well taken care of."

He moved to kneel in front of Taylor. "And you, my dear child, thought to save your Auntie? That's very sweet. You actually do look very much like her. Some of the same DNA obviously, but where are your brains, huh?" He stroked her head as if she were a puppy. "There now, don't cry. I will make sure you get back to your home all safe and sound, that is after I run some tests on you."

"No," Jeffy protested.

He turned to her, smiled. "Come now, Dr. Kino. You mustn't be too demanding. My patience does have boundaries." He knelt down in front of her, ran his hand reverently over her hair, to her cheek, to her collar bone. "You are the most beautiful creature ever to walk this earth. I am enamored of you, June Flower. I suppose you know that."

He reached up, ran his fingers over her lips. "Ahh, just thinking about tasting the softness."

Jeffy jerked her head away. His eyes bore into hers and then he stood. "You will find, June Flower, that I am not unreasonable."

"You are mad," Jeffy said.

He turned on her, grasping her around the throat and pulling her up from the chair. She struck at his arms with her bound fists, trying to break his hold and suck in a breath, but couldn't get leverage. Taylor and Kimmie jumped on his back, pounding on him. Gaff jerked Kimmie away and tossed her across the room. By the time he'd done the same to Taylor, Kimmie was back, this time coming down with a hammer fist to the back of Black's head.

That seemed to bring the man out of it. He released Jeffy. Breathing

hard, he backed away from her, straightened his suit. Gasping for air, she looked up at him, her brows raised.

"That should tell you something," he warned.

Jeffy shrugged. "It definitely proves my point."

His hand struck out, slapping her face with a loud smack. "It should tell you that even though I hold you in high esteem, there are some things I insist upon, and as my future wife, I insist you learn respect." He rose, motioned to Gaff.

"Come and take the two imposters to their cells."

Gaff grabbed the girls by their arms and walked them out.

Julian motioned to the chair behind Jeffy. "Please, have a seat. It appears we've started out on the wrong foot."

She sat, only because she felt a little dizzy. Julian leaned over and stroked her head. "There now. Truly, I'm sorry. I've found I can be a little over-sensitive about certain things. If only you can understand how long I've waited to meet you in person, how I've worshiped you from afar. I knew, June Flower, I just knew that you would understand me, understand my work. That your brilliant mind is the only one that can possibly see the potential for what we can do together. And our children, oh, sweet June Flower, our children will be amazing, evolved specimens of the human race. They will even surpass us."

He rose, walked away for a moment, then turned. "Here I am speaking of our children and we aren't even married yet. Of course, one doesn't have to be married in order to create children, but I'd prefer it, wouldn't you?"

He didn't give her a chance to answer before he went on which was just fine with her.

"My mother will be very happy indeed when I tell her I'm gonna marry a sweet Catholic girl in the old chapel down in Sao Luis."

"I'm not Catholic."

He smiled. "She will not know that." He stroked a finger down her arm. "Ahh, June Flower. I so look forward to that day. I can't tell you how much I want to make love to you. It's all I can do to keep myself from doing that right now. However, I will honor my mother by allowing you to save yourself for me."

Jeffy thought it would be wiser to not respond.

He stroked her hair, her face, her arm. "Still, for now, I will kiss you. You must allow it."

"Never."

"Let's talk about that a moment. I don't think you're in a position to be giving orders. Maybe, once we're married, you will become the bossy little wife most women become, but for now, I hold all the cards. Tell me, June

Flower, do you want me to release your parents?"

"Of course I do."

"I promised I would return them to your family as soon as you agree to all my stipulations. Still, let's not get ahead of ourselves. It will take time to help you to see just how good we will be together, and how together we will be able to change the world. For now, all I simply want, is a kiss."

"I want to see my parents."

"I assure you, they're fine."

"I want to see them– now."

"Allow the kiss and I will allow you that boon. Surely you don't think you can get something for nothing in this world."

She couldn't help the tears that came to her eyes. Where was Cameron? Why hadn't he come in yet? He should've been right behind her. She was positive he'd followed her. Even once they'd removed her GPS, he never would've allowed her out of his sight. She needed him desperately, but she also needed to see her parents. As much as the thought turned her stomach, she realized she'd have to comply in order to see them. After several seconds she looked up into the madman's eyes and nodded.

He smiled. "Ahh, I see you understand your situation. You are indeed brilliant, Dr. Kino."

He pulled her up out of the chair, moved close, tilted her face up. She closed her eyes. His mouth came down on hers, not harsh and demanding like she expected but soft and lingering, in a worshipful manner. Somehow that was worse. Finally, he pulled away.

He too had tears on his face. "Oh, June Flower, life is gonna be so good for us. You touch my soul."

She shuddered. "May I see my parents now?"

Smiling, he went to his desk, picked up a remote and pointed it at the TV. The screen flashed on. She gasped as she realized she wouldn't get to see them in person. "But— "

He shrugged. "I said you could see them. You see them."

"You have no honor," she accused. "You knew I meant to see them in person."

"Your time is running out," he said, not bothering to respond to her words.

She moved closer to the screen. Her father and mother sat on the floor, side-by-side, in a full lotus position, apparently deep in meditation. Jeffy felt a rush of warmth and love and pride. And strength. Such strength locked up in that room. These people were definitely not victims. They accepted what was and bided their time, working with their minds to affect change and to be prepared.

"You see? They're fine."

"How do I know that isn't just a loop of a video you took of them?"

"Delightful question, but then again, I knew you were smart," he said, laughing at his joke. He pressed another button. "Hello, Kinos."

Her parents looked up, listening.

"I have someone here who'd like to say 'hello.'"

"Mom? Dad?" Jeffy said through the tears clogging her throat.

Her parents immediately rose.

"Jeffy," Shelley said. "Jeffy, where are you?"

"I'm in this horrible man's office. He's gonna let you go."

"Jeffy, does anyone— " Eric began.

"That's enough," Julian said quickly.

"Don't worry, honey. Everything will work out," Eric said.

"I know it will," Jeffy answered. "I'm not worried," she said, glaring at her captor.

"Say goodbye to your mommy and daddy," he said as he clicked the button and their images disappeared. "Your parents' arrogance irritates me."

"It's not arrogance, it's confidence," Jeffy corrected. "They're confident that soon we will all be free of you and your crazy ideas."

He smiled. "I too, am confident. I'm confident you'll see the benefit of our union. I'm confident that in order to free your parents and now, your friend and your niece, you will agree to my plans. I'm confident that once you give your word to marry me and stand beside me in my goals, you would never go back on it. After all, the Kinos have quite a reputation. You never lie. Once you give your word, it's gold. It's one of the things that attracted me to you in the first place. I've watched you over the years, June Flower. Your behavior is stellar, well, except for one small thing."

She couldn't care less what he found in her to be lacking, yet maybe it would give her some clue as to how to handle him. "And what small thing is that?"

"You gave yourself to that boy."

She glared at him, not willing to correct his assumption. She'd never done more than kiss Cam.

"You were so young. He took great advantage of you."

She gave a bitter laugh. "He didn't take advantage of me. I took advantage of him and I have to say that I can't believe you've been watching me for that long."

"Oh, Dr. Kino, I knew from the moment I met you that you would change my life."

"I've met you before?"

His eyes opened wide. "You don't remember me, do you?" He frowned, pressed his hand to his heart. "I was certain I made an impression on you. Apparently not. I was a guest speaker at a Mensa meeting. You shook my hand afterward."

Jeffy realized now why he looked so familiar. She did remember him, but somehow, felt like she wouldn't grace him with that information. She shook her head. "Sorry. Don't remember. What's your name again? Black?"

His eyes narrowed. "*Doctor* Julian Black."

"And you're in the field of genetics?"

"I am in the top one percent of my field," he said. "And I've watched you for a long time, thinking I would run tests on you. It bothered me that you allowed that boy to sully you. When he broke your heart and left you, I have to say I was quite pleased. I knew you would get over it, and apparently you have. Now, it will be my turn to taste your sweetness. It will be difficult to forget that another has had you, but I believe I can push that fact aside."

She didn't know what made her say it. Perhaps it was his arrogance, but she couldn't hold back. "You have your facts mixed up. That boy, as you put it, and I are very much together."

He grinned. "Now I know you're lying, and lying does not become you, June. I must say I'm disappointed in you. Though I understand you're merely trying a tactic to discourage me. It won't work."

"I'm not lying. Oh, he did break up with me, but while I was in Africa we got back together."

"June Flower, you— "

"What? You don't believe me?"

"I haven't heard anything about a boyfriend. My sources are completely dependable."

She shrugged. "Guess they're not that dependable."

He gazed into her face and he suddenly realized that she was telling the truth. His eyes registered fury, directed at both his informants who were sadly lacking in efficiency and at her. "Have you given yourself to him?"

She smiled. "What do you think?"

"When?"

"What does it matter?"

"It matters. You must be clean. When did you last have relations with him?"

"Just before I left the house to come here."

"I can examine you. I can find out the truth."

"You want the truth? Here's the truth, Julian," she said, refusing to

honor him with his title. "Your entire plan is absolutely ridiculous. Even if I agreed to everything and you let my family leave, they wouldn't stand idly by while you and I marry and have genetically altered children. It would be only a matter of time before they find you and put an end to your pitiful, miserable life. You are whacked out. You may be genius but I'm thinking it's more like an idiot-savant."

Eyes flashing, he struck out, knocking her to the floor.

She looked up at him, smiling. "Coward. Take these bindings off my wrists and face me then."

He moved to his desk. Pushed a button. "Payne, get in here." He turned back to her. "I asked you to cooperate. I wanted to show you what we could accomplish together. You in your field of medicine and me in genetics, we could alter humanity. We could develop a species of human that doesn't get sick. That doesn't grow old. We would be revered and respected. We would be thought of as gods. But no– you wouldn't even give the courtesy of allowing me to explain things. Instead, you discard me out of hand."

"Because you failed the very first test of anything good or worthy," Jeffy snapped.

"What test is that?"

"Anything that takes away the free will, the freedom of choice from another individual is skewed and of the darkness. You, Julian, are of the darkness. You've followed the dark path. Not because you want to do something good for mankind, but because you want to be revered and worshiped. There is only one God, Julian, and you ain't Him. You are nothing more than a very sick man."

The door opened, saving Jeffy from another strike.

"What's the order of the day?" Payne asked casually, eyeing Jeffy.

"The Kinos are yours. Do with them what you will."

Payne grinned.

"No!" Jeffy screamed. "Let them go! It's not my fault your plan is so ludicrous. You'll never get away with this. You hurt my parents and you'll go down for sure. This whole place will go down."

"No one knows where you are, June Flower. No one knows much about this facility at all. Perhaps though you will come around. Perhaps a little time and seeing what Payne has in store for your parents will help you to be a little more malleable." He turned to Payne. "Don't kill them, do make them suffer."

"Gladly," Payne said as he closed the door.

❁

"If she's here, then I'm sure Cam and her brothers aren't far behind,"

Eric assured his wife.

"But how can you know?"

"Because I know them."

"Maybe she gave them the slip."

Eric shook his head. "They would've known that she planned to do that. They would've been on the lookout for that. She might have been able to get past one or two, but not Ricky, Joey, Mark, Cam and Jason. They're probably outside the building right now figuring out the best way to storm the castle."

Shelley wrung her hands. "I just can't help but wonder what he's doing to her. Is she frightened? Has he harmed her?"

"Did she sound frightened to you?"

Shelley only shrugged.

"She may have been a little upset, but she wasn't afraid. She..."

The door whooshed open. Once again, two men approached with guns drawn while Payne stood by the door punching buttons. The door to the tiny torture chamber opened. Once the cuffs locked securely around Eric's wrists, Payne moved forward, a large grin on his face.

"You can thank your daughter for me being here," Payne said. "Apparently, she's not being very agreeable to Black's plans."

"Good for her," Eric said. "I would expect no less."

Payne moved close, placed his palm over Eric's heart. "I know what makes you suffer," he whispered.

"Do you now?" Eric returned.

Payne turned suddenly. "You two get out."

The two men, who'd been busy taunting Shelley by reaching out and touching her in various places, looked up, their brows creased. "But, we were hoping we could get in on some of the action."

"I said to get out," Payne ordered, his voice calm.

Shaking their heads, they left the room. Payne went over to the door and closed it. When he turned, he saw Shelley nodding at Eric. "What?" Payne said sarcastically. "Is he telling you to be strong? To fight hard? He must be, because he knows I intend to make him suffer and the only real way to do that is to make you suffer." He smiled. "Oooh, the things I'm gonna do to you." He moved close to Eric, again, running his hands over the muscles of his chest.

"Come on, Payne," Eric said. "You know it's not her you want. It's me. You want me, but you're afraid to admit it. You think it will make you look like less of a man."

Payne's hands moved to grasp the waistline of Eric's slacks. He stayed like that for several seconds before he looked into Eric's eyes. "What I want

is to make you suffer."

Turning abruptly, he moved toward Shelley. She actually smiled at him. He grabbed her by the front of her shirt, but instead of her trying to pull away, she grabbed his shoulders and pulled him closer, driving her knee sharply up into his groin. He crumpled to the floor. Shelley ran toward Eric, placed her hands on his for just a second as if trying to release him, before Payne regained his composure, came up behind her and dragged her away.

"You're gonna die for that," he yelled, swinging her away to where he stood between her and Eric.

"I don't think so," she said sweetly, giving him a slight shove.

He merely stepped backward with the force of her push. Payne tried to scream as powerful thighs closed around his neck. He clawed at Eric's legs, trying to make him let go, but no way was Eric gonna relinquish his hold. He and his wife had been over this scenario many times. Shelley had executed the plan flawlessly. She'd gotten away from Payne, run to Eric to bring Payne close, reversed positions and made sure Payne was off balance.

Eric gave his legs a final squeeze, compressing the sides of Payne's neck until the man's body went limp and hit the floor. "Hit the release button over there, baby," Eric said softly.

Shelley's hands shook, but she found the button and pressed it.

The cuffs released. Eric knelt down by Payne, thinking maybe he'd killed the man. He wouldn't feel sorry if he did. However, Payne was breathing. Barely. Eric removed a knife from Payne's waist and a gun from a shoulder holster. Then quickly, Eric maneuvered Payne into place and had Shelley lock both his wrists and legs into the shackles. They pressed the button to open the door and made their way toward the elevator.



"Almost have it," Agent Jensen Deal said as he worked on the computerized lock at the compound's front gate. The building seemed to be built into the side of a mountain and going through the gate seemed to be the only way in. He was finding it difficult to concentrate as he thought of his Kimmie somewhere inside, going through who knows what. He was the best hacker working for Ameritech and if anyone could get in, it was him.

Seconds later, the lock sprang and Ameritech agents swarmed the compound. Jason had pulled them from every assignment. It looked like something out of a spy movie. Agents moving stealthily across the grounds in broad daylight, neutralizing anyone who came in their path.

Ricky, Mark, Joey, Jeff, and Keegan moved together as one, with Jensen and Jon Sweet bringing up the rear. Dozens more agents spread

across the grounds.

They made their way toward the large building, which looked like any other modern office building or possibly even a hospital. Surrounded by the rocks, cacti and drought-proof flowers used in most Arizona landscaping, it was hard to see the place as a den of criminal activity. There were dozens of cars in the parking lot and it looked like any office building in any metropolitan area.

They put their guns away as they arrived at the front door. It was locked, and would open, it appeared, only by a key card. From a side door to the left, a large man in uniform approached.

"Sorry, no one gets in without authorization," a beefy man said.

Keegan pulled out his .357 magnum. "This is my authorization."

The man went for his gun, but Joey stepped forward and gently took him out with a few well-placed punches.

"Thanks Joey, but I had it covered."

Joey shrugged. "Didn't feel like killing anyone this early in the game. The man is only doing his job."

Keegan frowned. "Geez, guys, I wasn't gonna kill him."

The others only laughed. It wasn't that Joey really thought Keegan would kill the guy. It had become a joke that Keegan, a former FBI agent, had a happy trigger finger. That joke had evolved since his being called in front of a congressional committee for excessive violence when he'd killed over two dozen terrorists while trying to rescue Jeff Davis.

Jeff moved forward. "You guys wanna keep your heads in the game, please," he reprimanded, although he knew their buoyant demeanor came from the knowledge that they were very close to rescuing the people they loved.

They used the guard's card to open the door. As expected, as they moved through the front lobby they were accosted by six more security officers. Keegan, Jeff and Joey had their weapons pulled and pointed. Joey hoped they were not about to participate in a blood bath. It was Ricky who stepped forward and actually saved the day.

"Hey, look, so, you guys know who I am, right? I mean, do you recognize me?"

A few of the officers nodded.

"And I'm sure you've heard on the news about my parents having been kidnapped, right?"

A few more nods.

"Well, we've tracked them down to this building, to this operation, run by a man named Julian Black."

There was a murmur from all present, including several employees

who'd been in the lobby when the agents came in. They all stood around now, their hands raised up as if they were being robbed.

"Now, I'm just gonna let you in on the fact that the FBI is on the way to raid this place and if you don't want to go down with the boss man, I suggest you cooperate."

One of the guards motioned toward the other men. "Who are these guys?"

"We're Ameritech agents," Keegan explained, holding out his credentials. "We're licensed to carry and we don't want to hurt anyone. We just want to help get the Kinos back safe and sound."

After a few seconds, the guards relinquished their weapons. The Ameritech agents holstered theirs. Mark nodded at one young guard. "Part of this facility is underground?"

The man nodded.

"How many floors?"

"Six. Two are underground."

"What's on those two underground floors?" Keegan asked.

"Dr. Black has a personal suite on sub-level one. He lives here most of the year. He also has an office down there."

"Anything else on this sub-floor one?"

"There's an OR, for sterile procedures, and Dr. Black's personal lab is also down there."

"And sub-floor two? That would be the lowest floor?" Joey asked.

"Yes."

"What's down there?"

"Sub-level two has, the uh, well, we call them cells."

"Cells?" Joey asked, eyeing Keegan who only shook his head.

"People volunteer to participate in controlled medical experiments. They stay in the cells so that Dr. Black can completely control their environment."

"That's where we're heading. Who can get us down there?"

The security guard looked toward an older co-worker. "Give them your card."

The older man hesitated and looked at Mark. "You actually think Dr. Black is holding the Kinos hostage?"

"We know he is."

"In this facility?"

"Yes, and kidnapping is a capital offense punishable by death in some cases," Mark informed.

The older man handed his card to the younger guard. "Take them down. I'll wait for the FBI to arrive."

Joey nodded toward the front door. "We have Ameritech agents outside. No one leaves before FBI arrives and clears them, got it?"

The guard nodded.

"Where is Dr. Black?" Keegan asked.

"In his office downstairs."

Keegan raised his eyebrows at the guards. "No one warns him."

One of the guards cleared his throat. "Um, too late. I, uh, thought we were about to be robbed and I phoned down to Dr. Black when you first came through the doors."

"Let's go," Jeff said.

"Jeff, Keegan, Sweet, take sub-floor one," Joey ordered as they boarded the elevator. "Me, Jensen, Ricky and Mark will take the cells on two. Let's move."

❁

Jeffy tried very hard to keep her eyes focused. She lay strapped to a table. The horrible woman with the steely eyes and stone-cold beautiful face had given her a shot of something and it was playing havoc with Jeffy's equilibrium. She tried to think of how to free herself, of how to get to her parents, but the only thing that came to her mind was Cameron.

She realized now, in the bleakest moment, how much she craved him, how much she loved him, and how much she depended on the strength of his love for her. He did love her. He'd proven that. If he wasn't here now, then that meant something horrible had happened to him and that thought filled her with terror.

Her captor entered the room. Doctor Julian Black. The suit was gone. He now wore blue scrubs. He was smiling that sick smile that made Jeffy just want to punch him in the face. Moving to her side he laid his hand on her shoulder as if comforting her. Jeffy tried to glare at him.

"What did you give me?" she asked, her words slurring.

"Just a little Demerol to calm you down and take the edge off. In a few minutes Marilyn will insert the IV and we'll put you out for a while. You won't even remember anything."

"Why? What are you gonna do?" she said, working hard to get the words out and even harder to keep the fear from her voice.

"Well, you said in no uncertain terms that you would never marry me and have my children. I prefer to have you in our children's lives, but, in all actuality, all I really need from you are the eggs."

She shook her head back and forth. "No! No, please. You can't do this. Don't do this, please."

He patted her shoulder. "Calm yourself. What difference will it make

to you if you're minus a few eggs?" He leaned over her, ran his hand down her body to rest on her pelvis. "They're all in there, just waiting for me to bring them out and start them on their way."

Jeffy forced the words. "You can't juzz take eggs. Izza process. Surely you know that."

"As usual, you underestimate me. I've developed a procedure that allows me to extract the eggs from the ovaries almost instantly."

"Excuse me, Dr. Black," Marilyn said uneasily.

He stood up quickly, frowned at his assistant. "What is it?"

"You have a call from upstairs. I think you should take it."

"Very well."

Jeffy watched as he left the room, kept an eye on him through the glass window. Meanwhile, Marilyn was unstrapping her arms.

"You're letting me go?" Jeffy asked slowly.

The woman ignored her.

Julian reentered the room, his face drawn and pale. He took Marilyn's hands in his. "You know what to do. The most important thing is to preserve the eggs and sperm taken from the Kinos. I don't care about anything else. All my research is backed up."

Marilyn nodded her head, her face as cold and impassive as ever. She rushed from the room.

Julian turned to Jeffy. "Come on, my love. We have to leave." He pulled her to a sitting position.

She leaned forward, her head resting against his chest. "Whazzz happening?"

"You and I are going for a walk through the tunnel. Come on now, I need you to try to stand."

He lifted her from the gurney and placed her feet on the floor.

"I doaaannn wanna go anywhere with you," she said.

"Oh, you're going alright. Come on." He jerked her along beside him. She stumbled, but he pulled her back up, put his arm around her waist and led her through the door and down the long corridor. It seemed they walked forever, but maybe that was because she struggled to simply place one foot in front of the other.

It seemed he'd led her to a dead end, for they stopped at the end of one of those long corridors. There were no doors. The only thing Jeffy could see was a framed sign hanging on the wall that showed evacuation procedures in case of fire. To her surprise, Black reached up and slid that sign to the right, revealing a small cubby that looked like a miniature ATM machine. He pulled a plastic card from his breast pocket and held it under a scanner. Then punched some buttons.

Jeffy gasped and stumbled back as the entire wall opened up. He grabbed her and pulled her through. She turned to watch the wall behind her close once again.

"You don't remember coming in this way?" Black asked.

She only shook her head.

"I guess that's because it was already open for you."

She stopped, made an effort to pull away from him. "You need to let me go."

"That, my sweet June Flower, will never happen."



"Payne's a piece of work."

"We do all the work and he gets to have all the fun."

When the elevator door chimed and opened, the two flunkies leaning there in the corridor jumped to attention. When they saw who was on the elevator they tried to pull their guns but the four men were too fast for them. Within seconds, the two lay unconscious and bound.

The young security guard who'd ridden down with them on the elevator stood open-mouthed.

Joey looked over at him, motioning him forward. "You okay?"

The guard cleared his throat. "You guys are good."

"Yeah. Okay, we're gonna need you to open all the cells."

The man nodded. They started down the corridor but stopped when they heard a small sound. The group moved silently, peered around the next corner.

There was a shrill cry and then the elder Kinos were enfolded in the arms of their loved ones.

Ricky let go of his father, pulled back and looked him in the eye. Eric nodded, assuring his son he was fine and accepting his love. Ricky then turned to Shelley, grabbed her away from her two sons and hugged her tightly before he pulled away.

"Have you seen Taylor or Kimmie?" Ricky asked.

Shelley's face registered shock. "What? Taylor?"

"No time to explain. Let's go."

They moved down the corridor. The security guard used his card to open each cell. When he opened Eric's and Shelley's, he was surprised to see Payne hanging on the wall, awake and furious.

"Get me outta here you idiot," Payne yelled.

Eric peered inside the cell. Gave Payne a smile, stepped back and closed the door.

They went on past. When the next cell door was opened, there was

another female shriek. Taylor jumped into her father's arms and Kimmie was scooped up and almost smothered by Jensen.

When Jensen finally put her down, he fingered his mic. "We have Kimmie. She's good. We have them all but Jeffy."

❁

Guns drawn, Keegan Tanner and Jeff Davis left Julian Black's office and made their way down the hall to the next room. A lab. They eased through a waiting room and found the door to the lab locked. Jeff blew the lock away and they moved quickly into the rear of the facility and came up short.

A woman sat calmly at a high work table, typing on a laptop computer. She was maybe thirty, thirty-five, and she was beautiful. She had porcelain skin, dark red lips, and chin-length black hair. She looked up at them with her bright blue eyes filled with disdain. Keegan and Jeff instantly knew she was no innocent employee. She closed the laptop slowly with one finger.

Jeff moved forward quickly. "Back off the computer, sweetheart."

"I don't know what you think you're doing in here," she began.

"Save it," Keegan snapped at her. "Stand up."

She only rolled her eyes.

He holstered his gun, pulled her up off the high stool she sat on and leaned her over the table, doing a quick search. Meanwhile, Jeff raised the lid of the computer.

"Interesting," he said, before he moved his hands quickly over the keys, scanning pages.

"You have no warrant to do that," she protested.

"Warrant will be through that door in a second," he said as he read reports on the most recent lab work completed.

"Where's Black?" Keegan asked as he turned her around and pushed her back down onto her stool.

"I don't know. Try his office," she answered, raising her chin high.

Keegan smiled. She was bold and brusque and she probably assisted with tests run on Eric and Shelley.

"You know if you cooperate, things will go easier on you."

She turned her head to watch Jeff as he made his way around the room, opening cabinets, shuffling through papers. "I don't know that at all," she answered coolly.

"Fine, have it your way. We'll find him. And then he's going down and you're going down with him."

"I highly doubt that."

"You don't think we have enough?"

"I highly doubt you'll find him," she said with a smile.

Keegan shrugged. "Well then, I guess we'd better get to it."

Jeff walked up to him holding nylon ties. "Here, found them over there. They should be helpful."

Keegan moved her to a chair and bound her wrists and ankles with the cable ties, then used more of them to bind her to the chair. He backed away. "That ought to hold you."

She smiled. "For the time being."

They left her, moved quickly through the rest of the entire level, but Black was nowhere to be found.

❁

Jeffy wasn't sure if she could take another step. Every time she started to sink down though, Black jerked her up again. Her fear was building. Obviously, he was sneaking her out some secret escape route. She kept telling him she would be found. But would she?

She'd never felt so alone in her life. Alone and helpless. Closing her eyes, she tried to communicate with her father, but the Demerol, along with her emotional state of high anxiety, was keeping her from being able to concentrate.

They turned a corner and there was the exit. He pushed a button on the side of the wall, the door opened and he pushed her through into daylight.

Squinting, Jeffy looked around, trying to get her bearings, but all she could see was the same dirt, rocks, small desert trees and scrub she'd seen earlier when she'd arrived. The Yukon was still there, parked on the gravel drive and behind it, a large steel gate. Holding her firmly with one hand, Julian fished in his pocket and pulled out a remote, pointed it and pushed buttons. The car doors unlocked, the car started and the large gate began to swing slowly out. Arms firmly around her waist, he pulled her toward the car, flung open the back door and tried to shove her inside.

She fought. She fought like she'd never fought before. Because she knew if she got in that car and he drove away with her, she may never see the people she loved again.

It was difficult to make her body move, but she kicked out with her legs, bracing one foot against the car seat as leverage and Black stumbled backward, both of them landing on the hard, rock-covered ground. Immediately, she turned over and began to crawl away, scraping her legs and knees across the rough terrain.

He grabbed her from behind, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her up. She screamed, kicked. He turned her around and drew back his fist intending to knock her out.

"You wanna dance? Dance with me," came a fierce voice.

Jeffy's head jerked around. "Cam!"

Black dropped her. "You. You think you can take me on?"

Cam smiled. "Uh, yeah, I do."

Black settled into a weak back stance, apparently fancying himself a martial artist. Cam had no patience. He struck out quickly, and the man went down. "Come on," Cam growled.

Julian struggled to his feet, wiped blood from his nose. Cam gave him time to get his bearings and then allowed him to charge.

Julian swung at Cam and tried to kick Cam's knee at the same time. To Cam's eye, however, the man was moving in slow motion, and he easily deflected the attempts. Cam thought it would be fun to toy with this guy, really punish him, beat him to a bloody pulp, but, Cam was tired and weak from the accident and this entire ordeal and he was pretty much out of patience. Squaring off, he drove a fist into Black's gut and supplied an upper cut to his jaw. Black crumpled, completely unconscious.

Cam dropped to the ground, pulled Jeffy into his arms, resting her across his lap. "Are you okay?"

"Think so," she slurred.

"You've been drugged?"

"Yeah."

Cam fingered the blue hospital gown, shuddering at what that meant. "He was gonna operate?"

"He was gonna steal eggs from my ovaries, but something stopped him and he dragged me out here."

"What stopped him?"

"Dunno. He got a phone call." She shrugged it off as her mind jumped around. "Oh, Cam, I was so worried about you. Where have you been?" Noticing the scrapes and bruises, she willed her hand up to touch his face, but couldn't make it happen. It dropped to her side.

"So sorry, baby. I had a little accident."

"Little?"

"Some idiot pulled right into me, knocked my bike down a ravine. They took off. Probably DUI. It was all I could do to climb back up to the top and run in the direction I last saw your vehicle. It was only luck that I literally stumbled across three Yukons parked at a motel a few blocks away. I stood outside the door thinking I'd charge the room, but, I was woozy and pretty sure I had a concussion and wasn't confident I could take on all three men. So, instead of confronting them, I decided it would be better to hitch a ride with them. I got in the very back of one of the Yukons."

"But the other cars, they, didn't come here."

"I know that now. I didn't know it then. I guess someone who didn't know God, could say it was pure luck. But I know God had a hand in that."

"You got in our car? You were with us on the ride here?"

"Yeah. I think I passed out, because when I woke, you girls were gone. I got out and tried to find a way inside, but no go. I figured we were at a back entrance." He pointed to the left. "I climbed up those rocks to get over the gate and tried to make my way around, but after a few miles, I realized I wouldn't be able to find the front, not in my condition. Something kept telling me to turn around and go back. I finally listened. Looks like I got back here just in time."

"God's timing is perfect. Thank you, Jesus," she prayed softly. "I was so afraid, but I'm so happy that you're here now."

He wiped at her tears. "Yeah, Jeffy, I'm here. And you're alive and God almighty, I love you more than life itself."

He kissed her softly, then pulled back and gazed into her eyes. They both looked up as they heard the sound of helicopter blades chopping the air.

Cam squinted, trying to locate the chopper so he could identify it, but it never got close enough. He looked back down at Jeffy's face. "Did you see your parents in there? Or Taylor or Kimmie?"

"I saw Mom and Dad on a video screen. We have to help them, Cam. They're in grave danger. Taylor and Kimmie have been locked up somewhere too."

He nodded his head. "I need to communicate with Jason. My phone was lost and my helmet phone was damaged in the accident. I'm gonna just sit you down here for a minute."

He moved her onto the ground, limped over to the man lying prone and searched him, removing a cell phone from his pocket. He punched in numbers and pressed the phone to his ear.

"It's me, Jason."

"Thank God. Where are you?"

"Don't know. In the desert. On a mountain. I have Jeffy and her kidnapper. Caught them coming out some door from some kind of underground facility. There are choppers circling nearby. Is that you?"

"No. That's FBI."

Cam listened as Jason explained where he was and what went down. When Cam ended the call, he went back to Jeffy, a large smile on his face. Collapsing next to her due to exhaustion and pain from his accident and loss of blood and relief, he gathered her in his arms once again. "I have something to tell you."

"Are we going back in to get my family?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Your brothers are inside. They have your parents and Taylor and Kimmie."

Jeffy burst into grateful tears.

Cam held her close, rocking her against his chest, and watched as one of the choppers came into view, and started a descent. Within minutes, they were being lifted over the mountain to the front of the compound. The second the chopper touched down, Cam stepped out, lifted Jeffy and carried her to the waiting crowd of people.

He set her down in front of her parents, stepped back and watched as she was enfolded in their arms, in their hearts, in their love. Cam yearned to be included in that circle, though admittedly, right now, he just yearned for a bed. He was dizzy, nauseated, so very tired and having trouble staying upright.

It was Jon Sweet who made his way to Cam's side.

"Hey, Mate. You're hurt," Jon said.

"I'll be okay."

He pointed at Cam's leg. "You're losing blood."

Cam looked down at his own thigh. "Hmm, must be why I don't feel so good."

Jon smiled. "Must be."

"Must've happened when I wrecked my bike," Cam reasoned, realizing his hands felt numb.

"Probably," Jon agreed.

"I think I'm gonna either throw up or pass out."

"I'd prefer you not throw up," Jon answered Cam, motioning to Keegan and Jeff who stood nearby.

Cam shrugged. "Okay," he said as his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

Between Jeff, Keegan and Jon, they caught Cam and lowered him softly to the ground.

❁

The grass where he lay was green and soft, fragrant and fresh. A breeze blew through the leaves of a giant tree overhead, allowing the sunshine to sparkle in his eyes. He saw her coming down the path, not walking, but floating toward him, a sweet smile on her beautiful face.

Her dark curls were down from the braid she usually wore, flowing softly over her shoulders and along her arms. His eyes settled on her lovely, upturned mouth, then moved up to her small nose and her dark, fathomless eyes. He became lost in their depths.

"There you are," she said softly. "I can hear you now. Can you hear me,

my love?"

She knelt beside him, lowered her head and kissed his lips. "I love you," she whispered. "Do you know that?"

She didn't wait for him to answer. "Stay with me now," she said. "Let's do this together."

He didn't understand what she was talking about, but suddenly, he felt as if a warm light moved through his body, from his head, down his torso, down both arms, down his legs, lingering on one leg in particular. The light made him feel happy. It made him feel loved. It made him feel like there will never be another problem in his life.

He felt energized. He felt powerful. He felt complete and utter joy. And then the light slowly dissipated and everything was dark. He felt her hand brush against his cheek.

"Open your eyes, Cam," she said.

He did as she commanded. Blinked several times. Her eyes came into focus. She smiled down at him.

"Hi there," she murmured, running her fingers over his forehead.

"Hey," he answered, his brow furrowed.

"How are you feeling?"

"Wonderful. Except you just woke me from a very pleasant dream."

She smiled. "The one under the big tree where I walked up to you and Jesus healed you with light?"

His eyes opened wide. "You did your little mind-melding thing, didn't you?"

She shrugged.

"And you did it to heal me." He thought a moment. "I didn't realize that was happening in the dream. I just saw you walking toward me and thought you were beautiful. Actually, you didn't walk up to me, you kind of floated."

She laughed. "Uhh, that's kinda creepy."

He smiled, tried to sit up. "Where am I?"

"You're in a small hospital in Tuba City, Arizona. We flew you here in Jason's helicopter."

"Tuba City?"

"Don't worry. The doc here did a good job. You cut your leg and lost a lot of blood but you're gonna be okay. You have thirty-eight stitches."

"Thirty-eight? Wow."

"The 'wow' is that with an injury that bad, you ran such a long way, rode in a car for hours, climbed rocks, walked miles in the hot sun and didn't die."

"I'd do anything to make sure you're safe."

"I see that. You've proven it over and over. When Julian Black was dragging me down that hallway, I thought I was never gonna see you again. It hurt so bad, just the thought. I love you so much, Cameron Wallace."

He blinked sadly. "But not enough to marry me?"

"I keep saying I'm gonna explain that, don't I?"

He brushed his hand over her hair. "Yeah, you do."

"I promise I will."

"Now."

"But I don't— "

"Now."

She sighed. Smiled. "I like it when you take charge."

He frowned. "Well, Jeffy that's a good thing. I'm glad you like it. Now, no more stalling. Tell me why you don't want to marry me."

"Okay. Let me see if I can explain, cuz actually, I'm not really very clear myself about my hesitation. You see, I've gotten so used to thinking outside the box about medicine, I do it about everything. I see that some things are the way they are just because they've been that way for so long. Medicine is like that. So is matrimony. I won't go through all the history of marriage because there is no single history. It evolved through many different regions, cultures and religions."

Cam spoke up. "Marriage is as old as, and originated from, the very first couple," Cam corrected. "And it was ordained by God."

"Yes, yes, but then it evolved from there," Jeffy argued. "Its purpose, like changed, or was used for more nefarious purposes. It was sometimes to protect bloodlines, the parentage, and sometimes to make a contract about property rights. That property included the female and I got a problem with the archaic idea that females are property. I don't think that's how God intended it. If you wanna go back to the first couple, Eve was made as a companion and helpmeet to Adam, not as his property."

"Agreed," Cam put in.

"I know marriage doesn't seem to be as much about property rights anymore, not in our country and many other countries anymore, though it is still like that in some countries and some religions. It might *seem* that now marriage is all about being with the one you love, like it's all *about* love. However, if you look closely at it, what one person owns becomes communal property unless there is a prenup, which means, it's still about property."

Cam nodded. "Because what's mine is yours, but you're talking in circles."

"I know. I'm thinking out loud. Bear with me. Okay, so it came to be about property. And really, I have no problem with that, with combining

assets for the good of the family, as long as the female is not thought of as a man's property."

"I get that. I understand the resistance there. Still, my love, if you're my girl, you're *my* girl. And I'm *your* guy. So, I guess it does imply ownership in a way, but still, I understand the slight nuances."

Jeffy sighed and nodded. "I'm trying to reason this out in my cluttered brain, and I guess I have nothing against marriage, especially marriages like my parents, my brothers and sister, and many of our friends. Really. They wanted to declare to the world the love they have for each other. Marriage *is* ordained by God. I'm with that. It's just that, um, I feel that marriage should be about our love for each other. I don't think the law should be involved in matters of the heart. I want to be yours, Cam, and I want you to be mine. Hmm, which again sounds kind of like property, yours and mine, doesn't it? I'm a little confused."

"Maybe you have a little too much information running around in that brilliant brain of yours," Cam said with a smile.

She grimaced. "I *do* want to wake up every day and know that you're by my side because you want to be, because you choose to be that day, not because some legal paper says you're not free." She heaved a sigh. "Does any of this make sense? Do you understand my hesitation? Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

He smiled. "Oh *my* Jeffy. Could I love you any more than I do right now?"

"Why do you say that?"

"You've always been so different. So unique. So— you. I think I understand what you're saying. I do. I really do."

"Then you agree?"

"I understand, but, agree? No. Not if what you want me to agree with is; you don't want to make it a legal marriage. I'm gonna state a few facts that you may not agree with, though, knowing your father and brothers, I really don't understand how you couldn't agree. First fact, women benefit from marriage. Marriage fulfills women. The role of wife and mother is the most fulfilling thing most women can do. Now, let me say real quick, that you are special and have a special calling, I get that. Still, Jeffy, fact number two, the alternative to you not marrying me is for you to stay single and go on with your life. How empty is that? How will that feel when you're fifty and old and lonely and haven't created a family of your own? I want a wife and mother for my children. I want you. And I want more than us simply moving in together because we love each other. I want to be part of your family. I want us to be a family. I want us to have children, children conceived in love, yes, but children who legally belong to both of us."

She smiled brightly. "I want those things too, Cam. And you are making a superb argument."

"Well then, marry me. I swear to you, I won't think of you as my property. I will be with you every day because I'll want to be. Isn't the problem only that you want me to understand those things before we marry? And I do. Completely. We are a partnership. We will love each other, and support each other. I will support and protect you, and you will support and protect me. We will make a commitment of love to each other publicly. That is really what seals the deal, much more than some legal binding contract. But, the legal contract, in this day and age is important. However, I agree with 'what God has joined together, let no man put asunder. I'm willing to give myself to you in front of God. I will stay with you not only because I have love for you, but because I want to always do God's will. I won't be staying with you because a piece of paper says I must. I'll stay with you because in front of God I vowed to stay with you. And that vow is as important as life to me.

"But Jeffy, listen to me a minute. I have some strong feelings about our roles as man and woman, husband and wife." He stopped, blew out a breath, and thought hard, because what he was about to say may end the whole thing. Still, it had to be said, and he was a man and he would have his say.

"Go ahead, Cam. I'm listening."

"Okay, but listen with your heart and not your superbrain."

She smiled and nodded. "I'm trying. It's a battle."

"I understand." He sighed. "A few minutes ago you said you love it when I take charge. There's an actual reason for that. A normal, natural, instinctive reason for that. Because since the beginning of time, women looked to men to lead, support and protect, which we've already talked about, but let me add to that. Women were meant to look to men. God made man first, and then woman. Adam had been around the block, so to speak, so, Eve looked to Adam for support and protection. That, to some men, means they get to be the boss of you. Order you around. Tell you what you can and can't do. But that's not how I see it. It's not how good men see it. Still, if I told you to go straight to hide in the basement I would expect you to obey me, because out of respect you would know that I'm trying to protect you and I know how to do that. Of course, there are exceptions to that."

She smiled. "Yeah, like maybe you didn't know that the bad guy snuck into the basement and I did know." She pointed to her head.

He nodded. "Exactly. But right now I'm talking about role models and the theme that's becoming mainstream that strong, masculine men are

toxic. I don't fall for that and I hope you don't either. Men are physically stronger than women. Men do the hard jobs. The jobs no one else wants to do. Strong men like your father and brothers, they're good guys. Strong men are not to be ordered around by some pushy women who think they should be treated like a queen. And yet, strong men are confident enough to do things their wives ask them to do, because they're not threatened and they understand that the relationship is a partnership."

"So, what are you saying?" Jeffy asked.

"I guess I'm saying that I want you to know that it's okay if I take the lead. Not only okay, but you should be able to depend on me to take the lead. And I do that by staying close to God, by doing His will. Because if I'm doing His will then I'm doing what's best for our family. That's the kind of man you can depend on. You can recognize my mistakes. You can call them out, and I'll make the corrections. You can depend on me to do that."

"You know Cam, I love Jesus. He is with me always. He is a still small voice inside me. And that voice is telling me right now that what you're saying is right and true."

Cam nodded. "I love Him too." He smiled. "So, let's write a ceremony to declare our love in front of God, Jesus, the angels and all of our loved ones and friends. We will be husband and wife. We won't have just anyone officiate. We can have someone we love and respect officiate. We can make it special, Jeffy. We can make it fit our own personal beliefs and values."

She nodded. "As long as you understand that if I declare myself to be your wife, then I am your wife. Not because some judge or clergyman says it's okay for us to be husband and wife. That's how I see it."

"And how do you see the part about a man protecting his family?"

"As long as I have respect and admiration for that man, I'm all in. Like my father. I respect him and admire him, because I know and understand he's close to God and striving to do what God wants him to do, which is love and protect his family. My father is wise and I now see you in that same light."

Cam smiled, put his hand over his heart. "I'm honored by those words, Jeffy. It's what I tried so hard for, to gain your respect."

"You have it. I trust you, Cam, to take care of me. To protect me. To keep progressing in life and to live so that you can hear God's voice."

He smiled. "Okay then, sooo, just to be clear, I'm asking again. June Flower Kino, will you marry me?"

She smiled. "Yes, Cameron Wallace. I will marry you." She clapped her hands together. "And we can have a giant party! We'll invite everyone

we know! It will be so much fun!"

"A giant party?" he repeated.

"Giant."

"Wow, you went from zero to sixty in two seconds."

She shrugged. "When I'm in, I'm in."

"Where would you like to have this giant party?"

She smiled. "Where would you?"

He thought a moment. Sighed. "At your parents' home. On that beautiful green front lawn."

"Really? That's kind of surprising."

"Yeah. Whenever I was away from you, I pictured myself driving up that long driveway, saw you opening the front door, jumping up and down madly like you did when you were a teenager. And then you would run down the steps and across that green grass like something out of a fairy tale."

"I was always so happy to see you."

"So, June Flower Kino, we're gonna get married and be a family."

She smiled. "We are," she said as she leaned down and pressed her lips to his.

He growled, cupped the back of her neck and deepened the kiss. His hand took hers, their fingers intertwined, and then she shrieked as he jerked her into the bed with him.

✝✝✝

James 4:4

"You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God."

Chapter Sixteen-Epilogue

Cam stood looking out the bay window of Jeffy's purple bedroom to the beautiful green lawn below. A fountain sprayed water into the air. Flowers bloomed. Yes, it was perfect. Though only a few people actually knew it, today, they would announce to the group of family and friends present that he and Jeffy were gonna become husband and wife. Cam didn't think he could be any happier.

He turned and looked over the room. It had always been purple, or, lavender, he guessed the color was called. Now, it only had elements of the color. A throw pillow. A painting, one he knew to be painted by Breez Adams, Joey's wife. The bedspread used to be a hodgepodge of purple flowers and ruffles. He'd been told that Jeffy's sister Bree had also had a purple pansy bedroom when she'd been a teenager. Now that Jeffy was grown, the spread was white with only one large purple pansy in the center. It was now very clean and modern. He smiled.

His eyes wandered to the slightly open bathroom door where Jeffy was brushing her hair. His heart skipped a beat. Moving as if in a trance, he entered the bathroom and stood behind her, looking into the mirror. They were different. Her dark, exotic looks. His dark hair and blue eyes. Yet in their hearts, they were just alike.

She'd dressed for the coming home party in her pink swimsuit and a white lace coverup and she looked good enough to eat. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "You're beautiful."

She smiled. "Thank you. So are you."

He rolled his eyes then ran his hands down her arms to her waist, wrapped them snug around her and pulled her back against him.

"I love you so much, Jeffy."

"And I you. Are you ready to face this giant crowd?"

"Let's do it."



The Kino mansion was filled to capacity and then some. The homecoming was on its third day. The first day back was used as a day of healing and hugs, of renewed vows of love, of realizing the importance of each moment with loved ones.

The second day was one of cleansing and organization as all the friends and family moved from Ricky's and Bree's home, back north to the larger Kino estate. There was no evidence of the man Eric had killed right there in the kitchen, in the heart of their home. It was a gruesome fact, but not one that could force them to leave the home in which they'd grown and loved.

Preparations were made and on the third day, a welcome home party to beat all parties ensued. Shelley and Eric sat together on one of the gliders that graced the deck watching the festivities. He had his arm around her shoulders and she rested her head on his strong chest. Their eyes seemed to move in tandem as they took in the sight of their friends and family being together once again.

Justin, Eric's oldest friend, stood with his wife, Lori, laughing at something the kids in the pool were saying. Lisa and Chaz Stewart sat together with Jodi and John Appel and Jeff and Mickey Davis at one of the round tables, their plates mounded high with goodies.

Caroline looked on in delight as husband Toby played guitar and sang with their own daughter, Grace and with Lizzy Tanner. Their audience included Heather, Rose and Daisy Anderson, Jason and Angel Lee, and Ricky, Bree and Taylor, who hadn't let her parents out of her sight since she'd returned to their safe haven.

In the pool, the teen boys, JoJo, Logan, young Eric, Jake, Brody and Gabe played water polo as Lily Anderson and Laynah Stewart perched on the edge and watched.

In the shallow end, Mark and Joey held babies Kelstyn and Emily, teaching them to kick in the water, while Breez worked with Sophia and Bella worked with little Aralyn Stewart.

On the climbing wall, Charlie and Matthew Stewart competed with Daniel and Jeremy Davis.

Other friends had arrived, Ricky's good friend Steve Reynolds, a P.I., some of Bree and Ricky's celebrity friends, and many of the Masters and students from Kino Martial Arts. The crowd was large and spilled down across the large lower deck, past the volleyball court to the beach.

Farther down the beach, Cameron and Jeffy walked slowly, accompanied by Kimmie and Jensen. Just behind them, Marissa was flanked by Agents Chris Coley and Jon Sweet, each of whom hoped they might be able to win a smile, or hopefully, a date. The group walked slowly

through the sand, apparently having a deep discussion about life.

Shelley had been completely unsuccessful in convincing Maddie Lewis to slow down and enjoy doing nothing. At the moment she was hard at work in the kitchen whipping up this and that and bossing the caterers around.

Shelley and Eric both looked up with a smile as Angel Lee made her way toward them.

Angel approached, bending to hug and kiss them both before she took Shelley's hand and pressed it between hers. "Have I told you guys how glad I am to see you?"

Shelley laughed. "Um, yeah, about a hundred times now. We love you too, Angel."

Angel shrugged. "It seems sometimes we don't really appreciate things or people until we don't have them anymore."

"Sometimes," Eric agreed. "I hope you know how much we appreciate you."

She waved off the compliment. "When you were gone, I fell apart. I kept thinking about that tournament in New Orleans, Shelley, when that KC girl tried to kill you and ended up shooting me."

"Yeah, that was a blast," Shelley teased.

Angel laughed. "And remember how I was trying so hard to hit on Eric? After that, I don't know how you decided to be my friend."

"Well, I simply opened my heart," Shelley said. "I stopped thinking about myself and let go of my ego and it just happened."

Eric smiled at his wife whom he loved more and more each day.

"So," Eric began. "Where's your husband? I saw him sitting with you earlier."

"He had some urgent business. He said he'd be right back." She looked up to see him come out the patio doors. "And there he is, right on time," she said, her eyes lighting with love.

However, it was the man beside him that drew the attention. Jason pulled his phone and punched some buttons. A few seconds later, down on the beach, Cam answered, looking up toward the house as he listened. He almost dropped his phone. "Hart," he mumbled.

Jeffy turned abruptly, following Cam's eyes. "Hart," she breathed. They took off running toward the house. By the time they got there, the entire crowd had gathered around but they moved aside to let Cam and Jeffy through.

Cam and Chris both wanted to scoop Hart up in a giant bear hug, but they stopped and allowed Jeffy first crack at him. She stopped right in front of him.

"Hart?" she whispered as if she couldn't believe her eyes.

He smiled, nodded his head. "Yeah, Jeffy, it's me."

"You're alive," she said as she threw herself into his arms. Burying her head against his chest, she cried. "I thought you were dead. But you're not, are you? You're alive. Oh, Hart, I'm so happy. I'm so happy."

She hugged him and kissed his cheek several times before she backed away. "I'm hogging you. I'm sorry. There's a lot of people here who would like to hug you I'm sure."

She stepped back and watched as Chris, Cam, Joey, Jeff, Keegan and Jon Sweet embraced their friend and fellow agent.

It took several minutes before they were willing to step back and let the man speak.

"Where have you been? What happened to you?" Jeffy asked.

"I was shot that night. Twice. Chest and shoulder. Thankfully they left me for dead. A couple of people saved me. I was too heavy for them to carry, but they were able to push me over into some brush. We hid until Loksalle's men left the area, and then they helped me to get away that night. I could barely walk and when I couldn't go any farther they had to leave me, so they helped me to hide again. They didn't want to go into the village for help for fear of being questioned by the bad guys, so they went in the opposite direction. By the time they returned, I was almost dead.

"They found some people traveling through the area who were kind enough to take me to a town where a man and his wife took me in and nursed me back to health."

"Oh, thank God, for all of them. The ones who hid you, the ones who transported you and for the couple who took you in."

"They were amazing people. All of them. So kind. The couple who nursed me back to health, the man, he's actually a doctor, and his wife, she teaches music at the local school. They were so kind. It took me some time to be coherent enough to remember who I was, to even remember that I'd been at camp with you. Finally, it came back in bits and pieces.

"When it did, I asked them to get information for me, about the other doctors in the compound, the people in the village and you. They went out of their way to do that. I can't tell you how relieved I was to know that it seemed everyone survived, though a few, like me, were a little worse for wear. But they couldn't find any trace of you and I prayed that meant that Cam had you. The Doc and his wife took such good care of me. Over this past month I've really grown to love them."

"Then I love them too," Jeffy said, meaning every word. "I wish I could meet them so I could tell them how grateful I am."

Hart smiled at Jason, then back at Jeffy. "Well, as a matter of fact.

They're here."

"They are?"

"Yes. I want them to meet you, to meet your whole family, but first I brought someone else. I brought the two people who hid me after I was shot."

"Oh, Hart, I want to meet them. They're here? Where are they?"

He smiled. "Hold on for just a second. They're inside. I'll go and bring them out."

Jeffy waited impatiently, as Hart went back inside the house. There was someone behind him when he came back out, but she couldn't see who it was. And then Hart stepped aside.

Jeffy's mouth fell open. Her eyes filled with tears. Her hand flew to cover the cry that emerged from her lips and then dropped away.

"Balon? Sanyu?"

"Surprise!" the children yelled.

Jeffy spread her arms open wide and the children ran to her. They met with such force that she fell over backward with joyful laughing and hugging and crying.

Righting herself, she stroked their faces and hugged them again and again. Jeffy looked over at her mother and father. They smiled at their daughter, enjoying her happiness.

Sanyu touched Jeffy's tears. "Do not be sad, Dr. Kino."

"Oh, baby, I'm not sad. I'm just so happy, and so grateful, it brings tears to my eyes."

Sanyu smiled at her, used her hands to draw a large circle in the air around Jeffy's head. "Your light is still golden."

Jeffy's eyes filled again, but she turned to look at Balon when he laid his hand on her shoulder. "Oh, Balon, I can't tell you how happy I am to see you." She took his face in her hands and kissed each cheek.

She looked deep into his eyes, searching for the broken-hearted young boy he'd been the last time she'd seen him.

He smiled at her. "Everything is okay, Dr. Kino. Ma-ma, she came to me in a dream."

"Oh, Balon," Jeffy murmured. "I love you."

Balon grinned up at her. "We love you too, Dr. Kino."

"How did you survive that night?" Jeffy asked. "I mean, the bomb went off and— "

"We weren't in the tent when the bomb went off. Sanyu wanted food and we went to find something for her. When the bomb went off we saw the men come with guns. We hid behind the food tent. We saw them shoot Agent Hart. We tried to help him but he was too heavy so we hid him. We

knew we couldn't go into our village, so we went toward Golan. We were very lucky to find the Otti and his son. They helped us get Agent Hart to a doctor."

Jeffy hugged him again. "I'm so happy, Balon, so happy you and Sanyu are alive."

"Jeffy," Hart said. "Let me introduce you to two of the kindest people in the world.

Hart made the introductions and Jeffy was right, she loved them. She couldn't thank them enough. The day was turning out to be a dream come true. If only Mirembe and her babies could walk out the door. But Jeffy knew they were where they were supposed to be. She let go of her need to see them. She would reunite with them one day.

The party continued and Jeffy thought she couldn't be happier. She and Cameron walked hand in hand, greeting people, hugging people, chatting and laughing. Jeffy watched her parents as they did the same. She noticed, wherever her parents went, it was like power emanated from them. They were so strong, so loving, and so grateful to be home together with their giant family and with each other.

Cam and Jeffy thrilled when Toby Nash, Gracie Nash, who was using her father's stage name, and Lizzy Tanner made their way to the small stage. Violet Anderson seated herself at a keyboard, and Logan went up and picked up his guitar. Toby strapped on his guitar and tuned it. The five of them gave the Kino partygoers a concert anyone would have paid big bucks to see.

Jeffy turned to find the five other Anderson children first, to get a read on what they thought about their mom and sister performing. She found four of the five standing together. One of the girls was missing from the group. Her eyes scanned the blue-eyed blondes who truly looked like angels. Jeffy could feel their love and pride. Her eyes were drawn to the only boy in the family, the dark-haired, blue-eyed Gabriel, named for an angel. He looked a lot like her Cam in coloring. She felt a strong pull from the young fourteen-year-old. He had a beautiful face, a dimple in his left cheek, a charismatic smile, an alert mind. She would have to keep an eye out for the young man. She wondered if Sanyu could see his light as well.

She then searched for Brody, Toby's and Caroline's son. He stood with his mom on one side and Daisy Anderson on the other. Hmm, interesting. Daisy was older than Brody. Caroline looked up at her son and smiled. Brody linked his arm with his mother's and they both nodded their heads to the rhythm and smiled with pride. Beautiful. Life could be so ugly and then turn around and be so beautiful, she thought.

As the mini concert was on the last song, Cam leaned down to whisper

in Jeffy's ear. "You ready to do this?"

She smiled up at him. "Nervous, but ready."

He pulled her close, lifted her face and kissed her soundly. The kiss ended when Toby Nash called them up to the mic.

Shelley squeezed Eric's hand as they watched their daughter walk up onto the stage with the young man she'd been in love with for ten years. "I bet they're about to announce something special."

Eric smiled down at his beautiful wife. "I bet you're right."

She frowned. "You know, don't you?"

He pressed his lips tightly together.

"Eric," she complained. "How do you know, and how could you not tell me?"

He shrugged. "I know because your about-to-be son-in-law came to me and asked for our daughter's hand in marriage." He stroked her cheek. "And I didn't tell you because he knew Jeffy would not be happy about him doing such an archaic thing and he was worried that you might tell her." He smiled at the cute pout on her face. "Would you have told her?"

"No, of course not."

His eyebrows rose.

"Well, maybe."

Eric chuckled. "Anyway, Shelley girl, he didn't ask my permission. He gave that much to Jeffy. All he did was ask my blessing, which I wholeheartedly gave."

"I guess I'll just write this off as one of those 'man' things."

"Then you'll forgive me for being a 'man'?"

"How can I say that I forgive you for being exactly what it is I love so much about you?" She put a finger to her lips. "Shh, let's listen."

Jeffy took the mic and handed it to Cam.

"I'm, uh, not big at speaking in front of people, but first I just want to thank Grandmaster Kino and Jason Lee, for all they've done for me. And the rest of you guys at Ameritech, uh, my brothers, thanks guys." He waited until the hootin' and hollerin' ceased before he went on. "So, Jeffy and I, we have an announcement to make, and I'll turn it over to her." He handed the microphone to Jeffy.

As Jeffy took the mic and began speaking about all they'd been through, Jason's eyes scanned the crowd. There were probably a few hundred people in attendance. A few dozen of those were security agents, not including the ones on the clock. Some of the kids were walking the beach, some people were serving themselves food, some at the bar getting drinks. He clicked his mic and requested a status update from the gate out front and then from other positions. Satisfied all was well, he turned his

attention back to Jeffy.

"And so, Cam and I are very happy to take this opportunity here in front of all you people whom we love so much, to announce that we're engaged!"

"Engaged to do what?" Jon Sweet yelled.

"Haha, engaged to be married."

Cam laughed. Jon wanted to hear Jeffy say the words and nodded his appreciation to his good friend.

"I got your back, bro," Jon yelled again.

"I think your friend's had a little too much to drink," Jeffy whispered to Cam.

"Uh, hot mic," Toby said as he took it from her.

"Oh, oops, sorry Jon," she yelled out.

The crowd laughed and cheers went up for the couple.

Toby spoke again. "Since I'm playing MC for the moment, I've been told to ask Grandmaster Kino if he will come up here and say a few words."

The crowd cheered. Those who weren't standing did so now.

Eric rose, kissed Shelley's hand and made his way up. Jason again scanned the crowd. It was as it always was when Eric spoke. Everyone stopped to listen. Even the kids on the beach came closer, waiting to hear what Eric had to say.

Eric took the microphone and turned to look over the gathering. He noticed that other than the sound of the waves there was silence. The honor of sharing his thoughts with this group of people was humbling, and as the spirit moved through him, his eyes moistened. He cleared his throat.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak with you all. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus said, 'But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

"When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!'

"Whenever we have a large group here at our home I think of that scripture. What an amazing group of people you are, though you are not the blind, lame or crippled. You *are* warriors. Every single one of you. Some of you just looked down and said to yourselves, not me, he's definitely not talking about me. But I am." He stopped, smiled, made eye contact with the several he'd seen who'd looked down. All of them now had tears in their eyes.

"Being a warrior doesn't necessarily mean what you think it means. There are some here who don't necessarily push their bodies to failure on a daily basis, learning to fight, battle, and protect. But they do other things.

They still use their knowledge and skills to help others. They argue in court. They feed and clothe and shelter the homeless. They give birth. They wake up and get going every morning regardless of how tired they are. They take time to converse with a younger sibling. They rescue a dog from the canal. They bake a cake for a neighbor. They sing a song to touch our hearts. They form organizations that right wrongs. They use whatever God-given skills they have in a way that benefits mankind in one way or another."

As he spoke the words he made eye contact with people, doing his best to touch the hearts of each person there. "I'm so grateful for you all. I'm so moved by you all. I'm so grateful for your prayers during our little adventure when my wife and I were taken. I want you to see what God is doing here."

He swept his hand back toward the house. "After my first wife passed away, Ricky and I lived in this house all alone. This giant house with just the two of us. Earlier in my life, when I was just a teenager, God sent two of the strongest warriors ever made, to befriend me, Justin and Jason Lee. Then God sent me a son who would grow up to have the ability to influence people on a global scale. Then God sent me on a mission to find my amazing Shelley, whom I love with my entire soul." He glanced in her direction and smiled at her blush.

"When she came into my life she brought with her a daughter and two sons, whom again, I love with my soul as if they were my own flesh and blood. That daughter touches the world, those sons are making their marks in huge ways. And then we had a miracle baby, June Flower, and everything she brings with her. She was meant to be. She had a mission to fulfill. God has a plan and she is part of it.

"The plan is ongoing until Jesus comes again. And you– all of you– are part of that plan. Look at you. Think— what miracle brought you here to be with us in this very moment? So many synchronicities. For example, how Jason met Angel through Shelley because of me. How Bree met Caroline long ago in a school in Georgia, and Ricky met Toby Nash at a fundraiser. How Jason hired a young Jeff Davis, whose life Keegan Tanner saved, and then Jeff miraculously rescues Mickey, Mackenzie Daley. And look at the size of the Tanner clan, and what will they bring in the future? And all of you I've mentioned, have borne another generation, increasing the number of warriors exponentially. Jason forms Ameritech, which becomes a training ground for twenty thousand more warriors. Twenty thousand! Think about that.

"I could go on and on— "

"And don't forget to mention the hundreds of thousands of warriors trained by Kino martial arts," Justin suddenly yelled out.

There was a murmuring of agreement. Eric repeated what Justin said for the benefit of those who were farther away.

"Thank you, Justin. Definitely don't diminish that. And I will add, those whom I trained who have gone on to form their own schools and train others. The point is, God is at work here, bringing us all together, testifying to our souls that He is real, that He has a plan and we are part of it. Every. Single. One of us.

"I'm so proud of and grateful for those of you here who have searched for God, who have not only found Jesus, but have lived life in a way that others can't help but see and want to know more about what makes them like they are. We are so happy, that we want to share that love and happiness with the world. And bringing others into the fold is a huge part of God's plan. I don't know His whole plan. I live by faith, just like you. He illuminates the part of the path right in front of me, and I step there, not knowing what the rest of the path looks like. I do it gladly, for I always want to do His will. And therefore I will cont— "

His body jerked back, his chest contracted. Toby and Justin who stood just behind him caught him as he went down.

Jason was chattering a mile a minute on his mic. "No shots fired. No shots fired," was the answer he was getting back from all his agents. What had happened?

Ricky and Shelley were at Eric's side in seconds.

There was action in the crowd as people grabbed children, took cover. Dozens of agents had their weapons drawn. Jeffy was down too. Cam, on his knees, leaned over her. He'd already searched her for wounds. "Jeffy, talk to me."

She spoke in between gasping for air. "Just– a vision," she said. "Not real. Just a vision."

Shelley and Ricky were realizing the same thing. Eric caught his breath and they helped him to his feet. Ricky spoke to Bree briefly. As Eric was taken inside, Bree went to the microphone. She did her best to explain the phenomenon of Jeffy's psychic visions and because she and her father were so close, sometimes they affected Eric. She urged everyone to please continue enjoying the party, explaining that a delicious meal was about to be served. She offered a blessing on the food herself, and then asked the DJ to get some music going before she left the stage and joined her family inside.

They were in the living room, huddled around Eric and Jeffy, who sat together on one of the large sofas.

Jason, satisfied that all was well, also made his way inside. He surveyed the scene. Eric's grandsons, JoJo, young Eric, and Logan, plus a few of the

other boys who had been staying at the house, Jacob Appel, Brody Smith and Gabriel Tanner all stood leaning against the front window, their arms folded across their chests almost like sentries. Cameron Wallace stood behind the sofa where Jeffy sat, his hands on her shoulders. Next to Jeffy was Eric, and next to him was Shelley. Ricky knelt in front of his father, while Bree stood behind the sofa, her hand on her mother's shoulder. Mark and Joey also knelt on the floor, their wives Bella and Breez sat on the second sofa behind them along with Taylor Kino.

Jason knew Kimmie and Marissa had stayed outside to take care of the Adams' children. Angel, Justin, Lori and Jodi occupied the third sofa, with Jeff Davis, Keegan Tanner and John Appel standing behind.

The group was quiet as Jeffy and Eric tried to explain what they felt. As usual, they didn't know exactly what it meant. They only knew one thing, God's plan for them was not done.

Jason listened as each member of the family, along with the few close friends, vowed to stay close to God, to stay vigilant and sober and to be ready for whatever mission God would call them on.

Eric as always, expressed his gratitude for them all and then suggested they rejoin the party to reassure everyone that all is well.

But there were warriors in the room, warriors with watchful eyes. Not one of them missed the solemn look between Jeffy and Eric. They all kept it to themselves.

Fourteen-year-old Gabriel Tanner watched Grandmaster Kino intently. He didn't know what to think. Something had happened. They weren't being very open about it. But Gabe felt something deep in his heart. Whatever it was, he too, vowed he would stay close to God. Pray often. Be obedient.

❁

And so . . .

Jeffy learned that the wonderful man, Dr. John Okello, and his wife, Moreen Okello, who'd taken in Hart had fallen in love with little Balon and his sister Sanyu and the children had in turn fallen in love with them. Even though Jeffy wanted to adopt the children herself, she knew it would be best to leave well enough alone. Balon and Sanyu were adopted by the doctor and his wife. They now live happily in Uganda with their new parents. Jeffy keeps close tabs and arranges their visit to America at least every year or as often as they want to come.

Family and friends had been ecstatic about Jeffy and Cam when they announced their intention to become husband and wife. The lovely

ceremony and giant party took place two months later, just as Cam asked, in the Kinos' front yard amidst hundreds of loved ones. Amazingly, Jeffy's dress was a traditional ball gown confection with small cap sleeves trimmed with pearls. Instead of a veil she wore flowers in her hair. Taylor, Kimmie, and Marissa were her bridesmaids. Little Sanyu and her niece, Sophia were her flower girls. Cameron's groomsmen—all Ameritech agents—Jon Sweet, Chris Coley, and Hart Akins, made quite the spectacle as they walked the beautiful bridesmaids down the aisle.

Mickey tried to talk her sister Marissa into pressing charges against her ex-boyfriend. When Marissa refused, Jeff Davis decided to pay the man a visit. Joey sent Jensen Deal to accompany Jeff, just in case Jeff's temper got the best of him. Jeff insisted that once again, they had him confused with Keegan. Jeff and Jensen taught the man about the evils of knocking women around. In the process, the man's wife discovered his affair, took the children and moved out.

Young Eric Kino took the initiative to spend a lot more time with his sister, Taylor, letting her know just how grateful he was that she returned home unharmed and much wiser. Their bond grew stronger than ever.

All of the young men—Brody Smith, Jake Appel, Gabe Tanner, Logan and JoJo Adams, and young Eric Kino—are intent on pursuing either collegiate studies, internships, or military service and are working hard to live up to the role models they've so graciously been provided. They all try hard to fill their fathers' shoes.

Keegan was ecstatic when Lizzy Tanner gave birth to a dark-haired, blue-eyed baby girl whom everyone is sure will be the most spoiled child to ever exist. They named her Iris, in keeping with her sister's flower names. Her brother Gabriel, who has her same coloring, is totally smitten.

Joey and Breez were equally overjoyed to welcome their baby boy, Ledger, into the family.

A year after Maddie and her daughter, Louise, had dinner together, Louise actually showed up at the Pine Forest Inn for her first visit home since Lisa was a little girl. She never left. Lisa thinks her mother finally realized what she'd left behind and what she'd missed. Lisa also believes it was the remorse that caused her to take the fatal dose of prescription

drugs six months later. The entire town came to pay respects to their long lost citizen.

Jeffy published her medical findings and took the world by storm. Scientists, doctors and new thinkers scrambled to integrate the new information and little by little, the old systems began to crumble and the new honest systems began to grow.

Shelley and Eric are even more in love now than they were way back when she'd first accidentally run into him in the lobby of the Atlanta high school gym where they first met. They still train together every day. That, along with putting Jeffy's newfound information to the test, their bodies seem to be regenerating. Their youthfulness and strength have made them the world's role models. Their faith and steadfastness in doing God's work grow every day. Eric continues to work hard to train up God's warriors in preparation for whatever God's plan may be.

✞✞✞

Revelation 22:2

"Through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

[1]FDOS - http://www.militaryaerospace.com

[2]LRA - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord%27s_Resistance_Army_insurgency

[3]Chimpanzees in Uganda - https://conbio.org/groups/sections/africa/act/the-forgotten-chimpanzees-of-uganda

Dear Father, I've written this prayer so many times. I know that You know my heart, and so You know I mean it every single time. This time Father, let me begin with gratitude. You have blessed me with so much and I am so very grateful. Thank you Father, for sending Your heavenly messenger to me to start me down this path. And forgive me Father, for straying from the path over and over. I'm so grateful for your grace. I'm so

thankful for Your Son, Jesus Christ and for His gift which was so freely given. And now, for the crux of the matter, Father I ask in the mighty name of Jesus, that all who read these books will be blessed, will be healed, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. May they be filled with Your Holy Spirit. May they be filled to overflowing with love and joy and peace. Give them the means to speak with their loved ones, friends, and neighbors and share Your Word and Spirit. Show them Father, Your mighty and powerful hand and work miracles in their lives that will soften their hearts and turn them to You. I rebuke any of the dark forces that may try to interfere with this glorious work, for Your light Father, is stronger, brighter, and more powerful and just than any other. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

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A Note from McCartney Green...

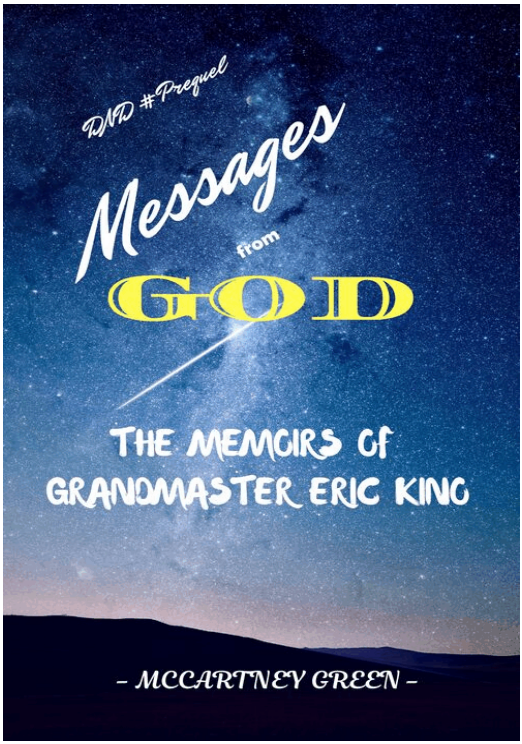
I will go where God leads me, I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

Before the story begins...
Discover the extraordinary event that changed ten-year-old Eric Kino forever. This short prequel reveals the miraculous experience that shaped the man readers come to know throughout the series. An essential read.

Before Eric Kino became the man readers have come to know throughout this series, he was simply a ten-year-old boy whose life was changed forever. Messages From God is the beginning of that journey—a brief but pivotal story that sheds new light on everything that follows.

Although this memoir was written after the first eight novels, it tells the earliest and perhaps *most important story* in Eric Kino's life. If you've ever wondered what shaped the man who would become Grandmaster Eric Kino, this is where that journey begins.



Continue the Journey

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series

by McCartney Green

#1 A Healing-In Jesus' Name
#2 Suffer the Children-In Jesus' Name
#3 Finding Home-In Jesus' Name
#4 Weeds Grow-In Jesus' Name
#5 Angels-In Jesus' Name
#6 The Worth of Souls-In Jesus' Name
#7 Warriors-In Jesus' Name
#8 June Flower-In Jesus' Name
#9 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name
#10 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name (Part Two)
#11 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name (Part Three)
#12 Feed My Sheep-In Jesus' Name
#13 For Unto Us-In Jesus' Name
#14 Such A Time As This-In Jesus' Name

Prequel- Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

and just for fun... Kino Martial Arts Student Handbook

All Books Free Download at: mccartneygreen.org

About the Books

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series currently includes fourteen novels and one prequel memoir. Each story brings its own message of faith, courage, love, healing, and hope while following the ever-growing circle of family and friends surrounding the Kinos.

Although each book contains a complete story and may be read on its own, the characters' lives continue from one novel to the next. Readers will experience the fullest journey by beginning with Book One and reading the series in order.

#1—A Healing—In Jesus' Name

When Shelley Adams crosses paths with Grandmaster Eric Kino, she is still carrying wounds from a trauma that changed the course of her life. Eric sees far beyond the frightened, uncertain woman she believes herself to be—and recognizes the strength, beauty, and purpose within her.

A Healing introduces the Kino and Adams families, the Lee brothers, and the dangerous Crane brothers in a story of love, courage, spiritual healing, and freedom from the victim identity. It is the beginning of the family—and the journey—that will grow throughout the entire series.

#2—Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name

Fourteen-year-old Toby Nash is an ordinary boy with an extraordinary heart. He loves baseball, dreams of helping and healing animals, and thinks becoming a singer might be pretty cool someday. Then he meets twelve-year-old Caroline and recognizes the carefully hidden signs that something is terribly wrong in her life.

As Toby and those around him struggle to protect a wounded child, Suffer the Children confronts the devastating realities of abuse while showing the difference one observant, courageous person can make. It is a story of rescue, patient love, faith, and the long road toward learning to feel safe.

#3—Finding Home—In Jesus' Name

Lisa Lewis has spent years building a successful life while distancing herself from the painful family secrets she left behind. When circumstances bring her to Pine Forest, Georgia, she encounters Chaz Stewart, his

remarkable family, and the grandmother who never stopped loving her.

Finding Home introduces Chaz, Lisa, Maddie, Jodi, John, and the Pine Forest family whose lives will soon become closely entwined with the Kinos. Through romance, danger, buried truth, teen pregnancy, incest, and post-traumatic stress, this story asks what it truly means to come home.

#4—Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name

The entire Kino family returns in a story centered on movie star and martial arts champion Ricky Kino and the fiercely independent Breanna Adams. Their love has never been simple, and the choices they make will affect not only their own future but the lives of the young people watching them.

As danger takes root close to home, Weeds Grow explores family relationships, fatherhood, personal identity, sexuality, fear, hatred, and the courage required to confront what has been allowed to grow in darkness. Some weeds can be pulled. Others fight to survive.

#5—Angels—In Jesus' Name

Widowed mother Lizzy Anderson is raising five little girls while working nights as a nurse and doing everything she can to hold her family together. Special Agent Keegan Tanner is dark, dangerous, driven—and carrying evidence that could expose a horrifying criminal operation.

When their lives collide, Lizzy and Keegan are drawn into a battle involving corruption, assault, child trafficking, and powerful people willing to destroy anyone who stands in their way. With help from the Kinos, the Pine Forest family, and Ameritech, they must discover whether wounded people can still trust love—and whether ordinary human beings can sometimes become angels for one another.

#6—The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name

Jeff Davis returns in a story that introduces Mickey, a fierce young woman who has spent much of her life believing she is expendable. When she is taken by people who place no value on human life, Jeff and the growing Ameritech family will risk everything to bring her home.

The Worth of Souls is a story of kidnapping, sacrifice, courage, first

love, and the immeasurable value of every human soul. It also offers an unforgettable glimpse of teenage Jeffy Kino and Cameron Wallace—two young people whose connection will help shape the future of the series.

#7—Warriors—In Jesus' Name

Shelley's youngest sons, Mark and Joey Adams, are grown men now, each carrying the teachings, strength, and example of the family that raised them. But even the strongest warriors may find themselves facing enemies they cannot defeat with physical skill alone.

Warriors confronts domestic violence in its most recognizable and insidious form—the gradual isolation, control, fear, and destruction of a person's spirit. It is a story about recognizing abuse, finding the courage to escape it, and learning that true strength is not found in domination, but in love, protection, truth, and freedom.

#8—June Flower—In Jesus' Name

June Flower Kino—Jeffy to those who love her—has grown from the miraculous child introduced in Book One into a gifted physician whose discoveries may change the future of medicine. But there are powerful people who will do anything to prevent that future from arriving.

Her journey takes her across the world, into danger, loss, breathtaking beauty, and the lives of two unforgettable Ugandan children. As Cameron Wallace returns to protect the girl he never stopped loving, the entire cast of the series gathers for a sweeping story of courage, family, sacrifice, healing, reunion, and one final twist that reveals the story may be far from over.

#9—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name

The next generation steps forward as the series moves between Hollywood and Pine Forest, Georgia. Young Eric Kino begins questioning the path laid before him, while Marine Raider Jacob Appel returns home and discovers that the girl he has known all his life may no longer be merely the little sister figure he left behind.

Meanwhile, seventeen-year-old Gabe Tanner—the charismatic only son in a family of beautiful sisters—is beginning a journey that will alter the lives of both the Tanner and Kino families. Love grows, danger gathers, and a shocking ending given to the author in a dream changes everything.

#10—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Two

The story continues as Gabe Tanner and those who love him struggle with the consequences of what came before. Families draw closer, young relationships deepen, and faith is tested as darkness attempts to reshape the lives of the next generation.

At the same time, Eric Kino III begins to see his own path more clearly when he encounters a young woman stranded beside a highway. One act of compassion opens the door to a story larger than either of them expects, proving once again that a seemingly ordinary moment may be part of God's extraordinary plan.

#11—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Three

As Young Eric recovers and the younger generation rises to meet challenges of its own, old roles begin to shift. Children become leaders. Parents learn to step back. New heroes emerge, new relationships take root, and Gabe and Taylor's growing influence creates waves far beyond their families.

The expanding circle of Kinos, Tanners, Appels, Stewarts, and friends is eventually drawn toward Pine Forest, Georgia, where new spirits are arriving, long-awaited purposes are becoming clear, and an enormous undertaking will require every willing hand and faithful heart.

#12—Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name

The warriors gather in Pine Forest with a mission: to serve God's children, meet practical needs, restore hope, and allow miracles to unfold. What begins as a tremendous act of faith and generosity grows into something far greater than anyone imagined.

But darkness does not stand by quietly while people are fed, healed, reunited, and awakened. As opposition mounts, this extraordinary family refuses to be deterred. Secrets are revealed, wounds are healed, lives are transformed, and the command to "feed My sheep" becomes far more than a simple call to provide food.

#13—For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name

For the first time, celebrate the Christmas season with the Kinos,

Tanners, and the enormous family of friends God has gathered around them. As they prepare to honor the birth of Jesus Christ, they discover new opportunities to serve, forgive, welcome, and love.

Old friends return. Former enemies reappear. Strangers arrive carrying needs that may not be immediately visible. Through celebration, surprises, conflict, and acts of compassion, For Unto Us asks what might happen if people celebrated the Savior's birth not only with words and traditions, but by becoming His hands and heart in the world.

#14—Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

A mysterious stranger arrives in Pine Forest searching for answers about his family's past—and carrying the weight of a darkness that has plagued generations. His arrival may also hold an unexpected answer for twenty-three-year-old Lily Tanner, Miss Maddie's former protégée and now a gifted chef at the Pine Forest Inn, who has begun to wonder whether everyone in her family has found love except her.

But the stranger's story is only one part of a much greater gathering. Grandmaster Eric Kino begins to discover that he is not the only person whose life was changed by an angelic encounter at the age of ten. One by one, others emerge—men who disappeared for three days, returned with a calling, and were sent to teach the world.

The Spirit reveals that there are twelve in all. As these chosen men are miraculously drawn together, their first shared mission leads them to Pine Forest, where dark forces are already at work and an entire family is under attack. Old mysteries awaken, new love takes root, and warriors from across the world gather for a battle that may reveal why each of them was called for such a time as this.

What Readers Are Saying

Featured Reader Review...

"I just finished book nine in this series—DND #9—and I can honestly say I've been hooked since I started a few weeks ago. I found the author's website and began listening to her read the books aloud, and I haven't been able to stop since.

"The best way I can describe these books is that they're like a "how-to" manual for living as a Christian, told through an incredible story. Despite being the best fiction I've ever heard, the characters stay true to their faith—they don't cuss, and they don't sleep around before marriage. Instead, they lead by example, showing what it means to live a life guided by Christ.

"The books don't shy away from real-life struggles either. They walk you through tough situations, showing how to respond with faith—when to pray, how to pray, and how to lean on God through it all. I've read the Bible so many times that, at one point, I started to feel a little numb to it. But these books brought a fresh perspective that reminded me why I love Scripture in the first place.

"I'd recommend this series over watching TV or just about anything else the world has to offer—except reading the Bible itself."

More Reader Comments...

"I know deeply in my heart that your books will indeed be used as training manuals. My spirit was a witness to that when I heard you speak it when I first started listening to the books. That lit a fire under me to listen to them all, ASAP!" Yvonne Espy

"Angels is my new favorite book! I had the weekend off and all I did was read. I couldn't put it down. I only have a few pages left but I don't want it to end. Plus when I finish I will have to wait until your next book comes out. I just wanted to tell you how much I LOVED reading this book!"

"Just when I thought your books couldn't get any better I was proven wrong with Weeds Grow! What an exciting, great book. I am having trouble getting my work done because I can't put it down. You are an amazing writer and I have to say WOW!"

"I absolutely love DND #1. I can't wait to start reading the other books

in the series. I was amazed at how addicted I became to the book. I can't stop thinking about the characters and their stories. I can definitely relate to Shelley's self confidence issues. Her strength is so great and makes me feel like I can be as strong as her in whatever situation life has to throw my way. Thank you for writing such an inspirational and motivating book."

"I have read the first three books and I love them all. They are addicting! The problem is, I don't get enough sleep when I read them because I can't put them down! I am now having withdrawals because I don't have the 4th book. McCartney- you are great."

"I have read everything you have put out and have been patiently waiting for more. I love them all as they are all unique and different. Can't wait for more.(a thankful fan)"

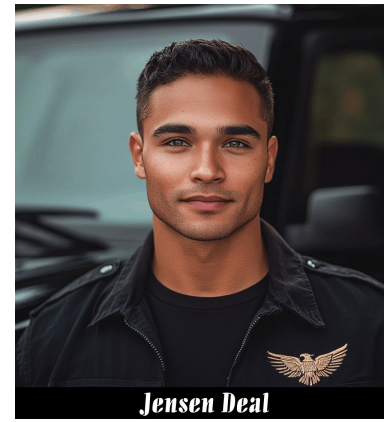
"Just wanted you to know I loved all your books. Now, I am doing something I only do with my all time favorites. I am going back and reading them again. Thanks for sharing your gift. P.S. You are the real deal!"

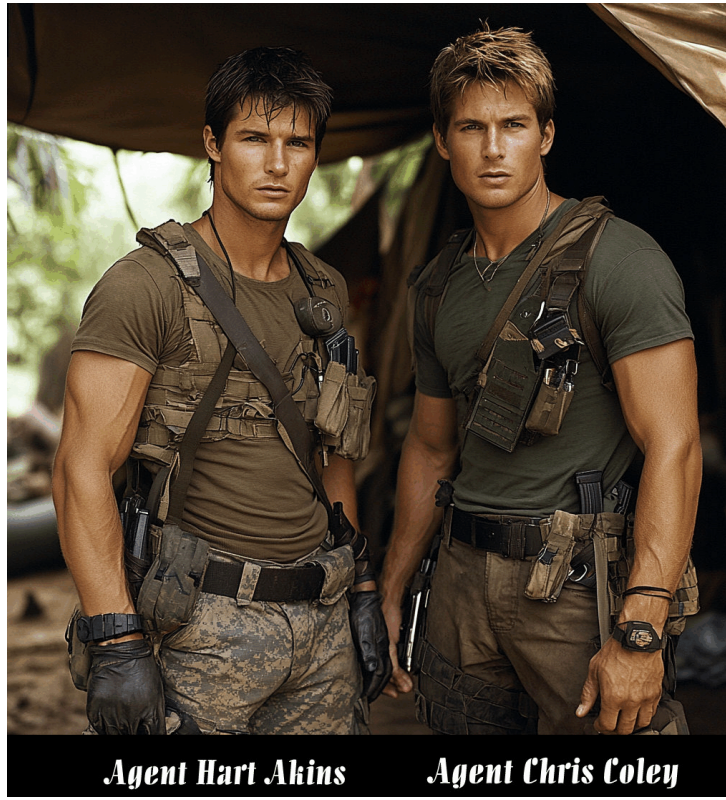
"Hey McCartney~ Thanks so much for sending me "Dandelions Never Die." I absolutely loved it! As a fellow writer and "professional romance novel reader" I can honestly say you are truly gifted with writing talent. I've added you to the list of my favorite writers and I'm looking forward to reading another one of your books soon. Hugs!"

More photos at mccartneygreen.org/photo-album!




Kimmie Lee


Jensen Deal


Agent Hart Akins
Agent Chris Coley

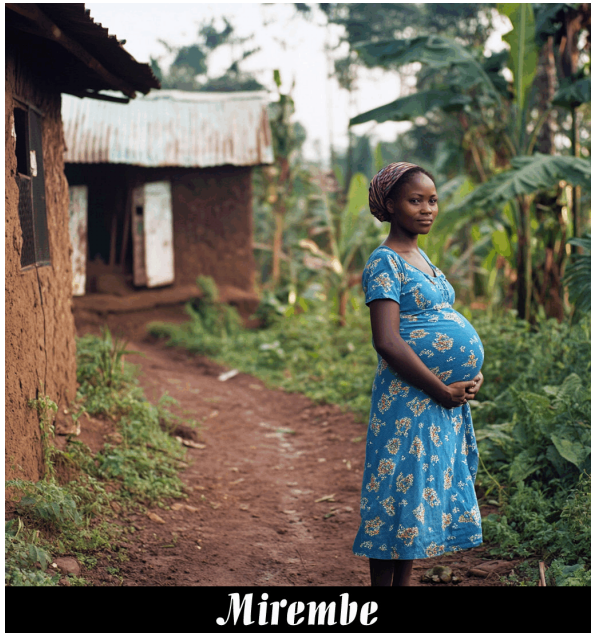


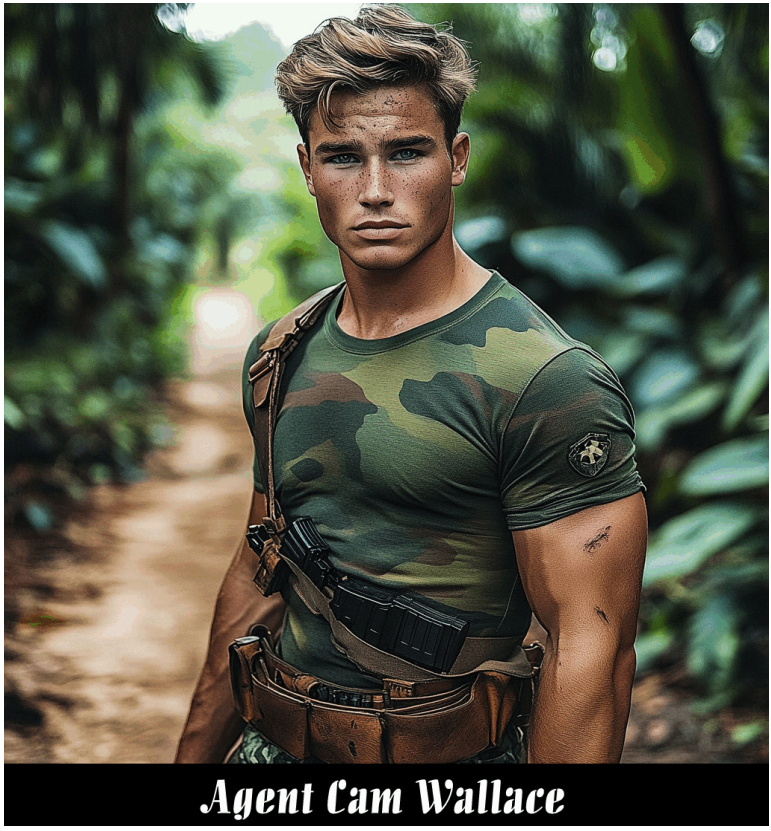
Dr. June Flower (Jeffy) Kino Age 25

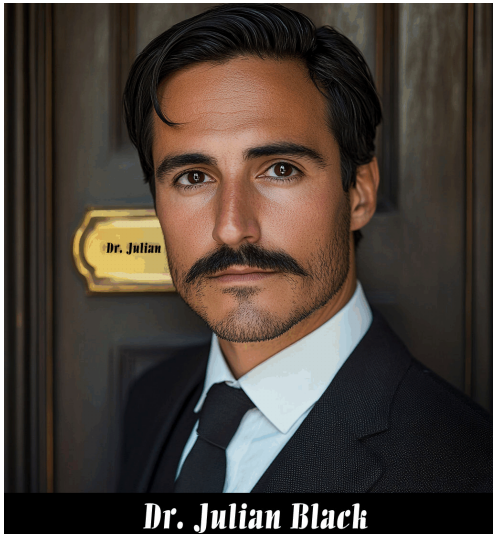


l-r Doctors Richard Todd, Donald McTalley, Gretchen Hall


Balondemu and Sanyu

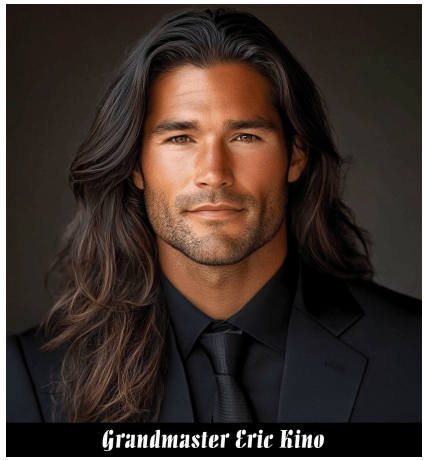

Mirembe

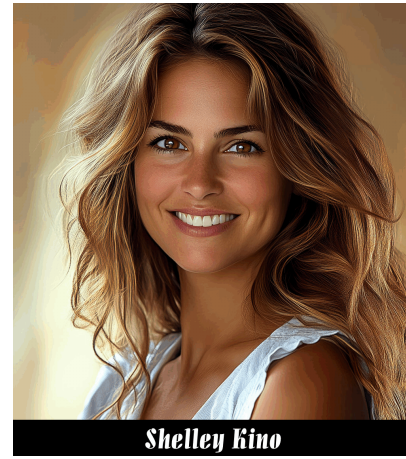

Agent Cam Wallace


Dr. Julian
Dr. Julian Black


Marilyn Monroe [Dr. Black's Assistant]


Payne Lanske


Grandmaster Eric Kino


Shelley Kino

Continue with DND #9 Circle of Life - In Jesus' Name

Sneak preview...

"Whenever there is bright light in this world,
the dark forces gather to put it out.
But don't worry or fear,
God's light is stronger than any darkness."
~Grandmaster Eric Kino~

March 15th Friday Afternoon
Hollywood, California

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

"Say goodbye," he said softly.

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

"And cut."

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

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

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

Ricky Kino smiled with pride at his son. "I don't think I could be prouder."

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

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

Young Eric laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You sound just like Granddad. You're becoming your dad."

"Well, there are a lot worse things to be, wouldn't you say?"

"I would. I aspire to be like you and him, and I gotta say, it's pretty

tough."

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

Young Eric frowned. "I don't think I like you being all humble and stuff, Dad."

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

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

"Again son, say what you mean."

Young Eric blew out a long breath, took a minute to put his thoughts together. "Okay, it's like, I feel strong and confident, and part of that is because I have so much confidence in you, in everything you've ever said or taught me. So, it's like my confidence lies in you, like, you the big movie star, the martial arts champion, you can do no wrong, or like, there's nothing you couldn't master, nothing you don't know."

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

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

"Yes—and wiser. Wanna take me on?"

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

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

✝✝✝

Continue the story in DND #9 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name

Pi, Pi, Everywhere is Pi

Pi is a reminder that what appears random is, in fact, part of God's perfect order.

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