
DND #11
Circle of Life
In Jesus' Name
Part 3
McCartney Green

DND #11

Circle of Life
In Jesus' Name
Part 3

McCartney Green

Copyright © 2026 McCartney Green
Website Edition October 2026

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

I'm supposed to say that, but really, share, share, share. You may share this work in 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 for #11
Same year as Book #10, a few hours after #10 ends
This "Keeping Tabs" is as of Tuesday, October 22 at Noon

West Coast Family

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

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

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

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

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

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

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

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

Lee Families
Justin turned 66 in March
Lori turned 52 in April

Jason turned 58 in April
Angel turned 55 in May

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

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

East Coast Family

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

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

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

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

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

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

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

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

Tanner Family
Keegan Tanner will be 50 Feb 8
Lizzy turned 42 April 10

Heather will be 25 Jan 10
Rose will be 24 Dec 25
Violet will be 24 Dec 25
Lily will be 23 Dec 19
Daisy will be 23 Dec 19
Gabe turned 18 June 14
Iris will be 3 Dec 10
Expecting baby in December

<u>Others in the Community</u>

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

Agent CJ Blackmon turned 28 in May

Mike Moreland [Advertising Entrepreneur] will be 26 in September

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

Agent Andrew Dalton will be 39 Jan 5

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

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

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

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

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

✞✞✞

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."
Isaiah 41:10

✞✞✞

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."
Galatians 5:13

✞✞✞

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
Philippians 4:6

✞✞✞

✝✝✝

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart,
as working for the Lord, not for human masters,
since you know that you will receive
an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.
It is the Lord Christ you are serving."
Colossians 3:23-24

✝✝✝

“We are not here to lie on soft mattresses or sit in
comfy chairs and be entertained.
We are here to serve God by serving His children.”
~Grandmaster Eric Kino~

Note to Reader:
DND #9, Circle of Life – Part I, DND #10, Circle of Life – Part 2, and this book, DND #11, Circle of Life – Part 3, are one continuous story. For the best reading experience, please read Parts I and 2 before beginning this book.

Chapter One

October 22nd, Tuesday just before Noon
Press Conference, FBI Field Office, Los Angeles, California

The Kino family waited inside the lobby of the FBI building. They were promptly briefed that Special Agent Williams would give a quick rundown for the press and then it would be opened to questions. Currently they stood quietly watching through the front window as techs set up a lectern and microphone, and cameramen and reporters filed into the area just past the steps.

"Good grief," Jordan whispered. "How many news stations are there in LA?"

"It's not just LA," Bree answered her. "But there are approximately twenty-three local news outlets, and there are even more national news personnel, and print reporters, and then, there is the social media people, like Isla August. We gave Isla a pass, and several others who requested a pass whom we like to support because they are honest."

"This is all so weird. I feel like I'm in another world," Jordan said.

"I know what you mean," Gabe said. "But, you get used to it."

Young Eric looked down at her, smiled and squeezed her hand. She looked up at him. "You're awfully quiet."

He nodded. "Just getting my thoughts in order in case anyone asks me any questions, which I'm sure they will."

"Are you nervous?"

"No. Just like being prepared."

"You don't think they'll ask me any questions do you?"

"It's possible."

"Oh, I don't know if I can do this."

"Well, if they ask you something and you don't want to speak, just let me know and I'll speak for you."

She nodded.

"The main thing is that they see you right here, by my side, a show of solidarity for our family."

"Okay. How do I look?"

Taylor giggled. "You look cute as ever. My top looks better on you than it does on me."

Young Eric looked over at his father, who was unusually quiet. He was

looking out the glass doors, scanning the area. Besides local police and FBI there were at least a dozen or more Ameritech agents who would completely encircle the family once they step outside. They were all in black, vested and armed, and they looked very intimidating. Uncle Joey was outside, looking things over, and looking very official in his black suit with the Ameritech seal embroidered on the breast pocket.

Eric thought about that seal. It was new, thanks to Gabe's ideas. It was a start toward having Ameritech recognized instantly, and bringing honor and pride to being an agent. The seal included an eagle, to represent the USA since that's where Ameritech originated, and in front of the eagle's midsection was the world. In one claw the eagle held a flag. Uncle Joey's flag was a US flag, but it depended on whatever country the agent is working in. In the other claw were the scales of justice. A ribbon above the eagle had three words on it: love, strength and peace. Eric liked it and was impressed with how a few words from Gabe were changing an entire giant company. They were changing the titles they called each other and changing ranks too. And they soon would have new dress uniforms. It was exciting.

His thoughts came to an end as the aide motioned for the Kinos to follow him and they all filed out onto the steps in front of the building. Immediately, there was a loud sound of cameras clicking away. Ricky and Bree stood on the top step. In front of them stood Gabe, then Taylor, Jordan and young Eric. Also on the steps were FBI Special Agent Williams, Ameritech Deputy Chief Joey Adams, the police chiefs from the Los Angeles Police Department and the Hillcrest Police Department.

Special Agent Williams immediately stepped up to the mic and in a strong voice and a very no-nonsense attitude, he introduced himself and the other people behind him, spoke about how they all worked together, and then began to explain the case. He began with young Eric's abduction from the convenience store. He spoke of how they pulled the video, which he understood was leaked to the public and therefore knew that they had all seen it.

He went on to explain the facts in the case, the phone calls made, the videos, how they deduced from info Eric gave them on the videos that he was being held across the border and how they worked with the Mexican police, Ameritech, and private volunteers to search the northern Mexican Baja area mines. He then explained how little Josie Perez was taken from her school and brought to the place where Eric Kino, III was being held. Williams finally succinctly ended with a curt statement.

"Before we could find Eric Kino and Josie Perez, Eric was able to get out of his restraints. He was able to subdue his abductors and he discovered Miss Perez in a room. They left the mine together but were detained by Peter Perez who was the main conspirator. Mr. Kino was then able to overcome Mr. Perez and use his phone to call for help. Within ten minutes the Mexican police, myself, other FBI and Ameritech agents

were there to assess the situation and to gain custody of the abductors. We're grateful that this heinous act was able to come to a conclusion where the victims were recovered safely. We're grateful to Mexican authorities working with us and for the fine law enforcement personnel who collaborated on this case. When we work together, we are powerful." He nodded at the LAPD chief. "I'll turn the time over to Chief Boyd."

There was silence as the Chief walked forward. "I agree wholeheartedly with Special Agent Williams, that together, we are powerful. We will now take questions." He pointed at one national reporter.

"This was obviously a harrowing experience. As a mother myself, I'd like to ask Breanna Adams her thoughts on what took place."

The Chief stepped back and Bree moved forward. She smiled and nodded. "It's been a difficult few days. We love our children so much, and we want them safe and alive. And when that safety is threatened, we have a choice. We can fall apart completely, or we can stay strong, stay in prayer, and ask God to protect them. We did the latter and we are grateful that we've been allowed to keep Eric with us. And I know I can speak for Jewell Perez, Josie's mother, who has become a dear friend of mine, that she feels the same way."

She immediately stepped away and the Chief called on another reporter.

"Was Eric Kino's arrest a few weeks ago related to the abduction?"

The Chief nodded. "It actually was. Peter Perez hired men to drug his stepdaughter and try to pin the blame on Mr. Kino."

"Can you tell us why he did that? And was that related to the attempted stabbing of Jordan Brooks?"

"Yes, the attempted stabbing was related. Mr. Perez had been incarcerated for the attempted rape of his stepdaughter five years ago. He seemed to build up some resentment for her during that time. Once he got out of jail on probation, he violated that probation by accosting Miss Brooks. He knew once he'd crossed that line, she would try to have his probation revoked and so he began to threaten her. Then apparently his attention shifted to Mr. Kino, and more appropriately, the Kino's money." He looked around, pointed at a reporter from the LA Times.

"Thank you, Chief. My question is for Eric Kino. Is it true that you actually killed several men in order to get away from your abductors?"

Young Eric drew a deep breath. His father put a calming hand on his shoulder. Eric moved forward to stand in front of the microphone. As camera shutters clicked madly he nodded. "Yes, it's true."

"Did you actually *have* to kill them?"

"It was them or me. I was in survival mode. I fought with them. They tried to kill me. I came out on top of those battles, and I'm grateful for that. And I didn't know at first that Perez had taken little Josie. When I found her, I knew I had to do whatever I could to make sure we both get

back alive."

"So, how many had you fought before you found Josie?"

"I'd fought six men. I killed four of them."

"I understand you killed five men. Who was the last man you killed?"

Eric sighed. "After I found Josie we got out of the mine where we were being held and Perez jumped me with a large hunting knife."

"How did you kill him?"

Eric frowned. Ricky Kino stepped forward. "It's been a hard time for Eric, having had to kill in order to save his own life and that of Josie. He'd rather not go into the details right now as it's been traumatic for him."

The reporter started to argue, but stopped when Ricky raised his brows at him and pinned him with a dark stare.

Chief Boyd pointed to another reporter.

"Thank you," the woman said. "I heard you actually shot your abductors. Is that true?"

Ricky remained by his son's side as young Eric spoke. "I shot the one who was trying to shoot me, and one other."

"Where did you get the gun?"

"From the guy trying to shoot me," he said slowly.

The Chief called on another reporter.

"Thank you. Will there be any charges brought against Eric Kino for the killing of any of those five?"

Special Agent Williams stepped forward. "There has been a thorough investigation at the scene and no charges will be brought against Mr. Kino. The case is closed."

Eric and Ricky went back to stand on the steps and the Chief called on another reporter.

"Miss Brooks, can you comment on your relationship with Eric Kino?"

She looked up at Eric, her eyes wide. "What should I say?"

"If you want to answer, then tell the truth, but you don't have to give details. And if you don't want to answer, just say no comment at this time." He smiled at her, touched her cheek. "Or I can answer for you."

She swallowed. "I'll do it. I'm not a coward."

She went to the mic, drew a deep breath. "Eric and I have just recently started dating but we are very close. I think he's an amazing guy. I'm proud of him for getting out of that mine and for saving my sister and just this morning I told God 'thank you,' for giving him the strength he needed to get out of those handcuffs and fight those bad men. If he hadn't, well, I can't even imagine what would have happened."

The reporter who'd asked about him being charged spoke up again without being called upon. "So, you're saying that it's okay with you that your boyfriend just killed five men?"

"Okay with me? Absolutely. Special Agent Williams just told you

what they had planned. If Eric hadn't taken care of business, he and my little sister would be sealed into little pine boxes and buried somewhere in northern Mexico, dying a long, slow, agonizing death. Do you have a sister, or brother or mother or father? Try to imagine the terror taking place if they were taken. Why are you trying to spin this against Eric? He did what he had to do to stay alive. If right now, you were on fire, you would roll on the ground and scream and beg someone to help you put out the fire. And no one would fault you for wanting that fire out. Well, that's how it was. It was like he was on fire, and he did what he had to do to put that fire out. And I think you're out of questions." She turned abruptly and walked back to Eric's side.

The whole family was grinning at her. Taylor hugged her. "I knew you were one of us," she whispered.

"That'll make the national news," Gabe said softly with a chuckle.

The Chief pointed to Isla August. "Go ahead."

"Thank you," she said brightly. "Eric, we can all see from the bruises on your face that you have some injuries. Are there injuries that we can't see?"

Young Eric stepped down again. "Hi Isla and thanks for the question. Yes, I have three large and one small knife wound on my chest and abdomen. One of the cuts was infected but is getting better quickly. I also have a concussion."

"How did you get the concussion?" she asked.

"It happened when the guy who abducted me bashed my head against a concrete wall while I was restrained."

There was a murmur from the crowd.

A bunch of reporters raised their hands quickly.

"Go ahead," the Chief said.

"Eric, are you still planning on fighting in the Kino Challenge?"

He nodded. "Yes. I won't be able to train for another week, because of the concussion, but I'm still gonna be able to make it."

"Do you think this little interlude in your training is gonna hold you back, maybe injure your chances of winning?"

Eric smiled. "Well, I don't know, but we'll know by the end of the Challenge."

Someone asked the Hillcrest police about their place in the investigation and Eric went back to his place. He sighed. He was suddenly very tired.

The Hillcrest police chief finished and someone asked Joey about the part Ameritech played. When Joey finished speaking the Chief spoke into the mic. "I'm only going to allow a few more questions."

"I just have one more," Isla said quickly.

He nodded. "Go ahead."

"So, Eric, all those hours you were restrained and just waiting, what were you thinking? What went through your head?"

Eric nodded. "I was doing the same thing that I knew my family was doing, and that is, praying."

"Asking God to save you?"

"Well, more like asking God to either help someone find me, or help me to accept that it may be His will for my life to be over. Either way, I stayed in prayer. He gave me peace. And He spoke to me in my heart and told me to fight hard to get free. And so I did. He answered my prayers and here I am."

"So, what do you say to those people who are going through similar hard times and they don't feel like God is answering their prayers? I mean, there are many who don't survive like you and Josie did. Why are you still here and others don't make it?" Isla asked, playing devil's advocate, because she understood that people often ask that question and she was pretty sure that the Kinos would have a satisfactory answer.

"Well, it's not because I'm special. I'm still alive only because God's not finished with me. He has a plan for each of us, and my work on this earth is apparently, not finished. I prayed, my family prayed, and thanks to your prayer circle, Isla, lots of others prayed for me. Maybe those prayers gave me the strength to get free. Maybe they gave me peace, or a clear head. Maybe the people who prayed will be blessed because they prayed righteous prayers."

"And of course," another reporter put in. "Because you're a Kino, God granted your pleas. But others are not so lucky. So, why are the Kinos so blessed and so special?"

Eric looked up at the man, and prayed quickly for the right words to be said. But his father stepped down again and sent Eric back to his place.

"I'm gonna answer this question and it will be the end of the conference. We Kinos have been blessed in many ways. And we try to live honorable lives, worthy of those blessings. We try to live with integrity and honesty, and bravery, protecting the innocent and the less fortunate whenever we can. We work hard. We pray hard. We worship hard. We play hard. But like Eric said, we're not special.

"When I was ten years old, just a little boy, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. My father and I were devastated. We prayed hard about this. We begged God to spare her, to heal her. We cried, we suffered, she suffered. But she died right after I turned eleven. Some might say that God didn't answer our prayers. But you see, He did. It's just that the answer was 'no.' We cried to Him, 'Why? Why won't You help her?' And we listened very hard. And finally, the answer came. Because what she was supposed to do on this Earth, her path, her plan, had been fulfilled. She'd done what she came to do. And we could either accept God's good and perfect will, or we could turn our backs on God and end the relationship. We chose the light over the darkness. We chose to accept His will. We chose to admit that we don't know everything and we don't understand how everything works and we need to trust God. Trust Him.

And because we did this, He granted us peace of mind and comfort.

"And if my son had been taken away from us, we would mourn him, we would miss him, but we would know of a certainty that he was where he was supposed to be. If we let go of what we want to happen and just trust God, things will work out for the best. Not what *we* think is best, but what God thinks is best. Because God, in His infinite wisdom, knows best, because He knows the whole plan, and we don't. I hope this explanation helps. Thank you for your interest. I wish you all the best. And thanks to the brave men and women at the LAPD, at the Hillcrest PD, at the FBI and at Ameritech. Thank you for your honest and brave service. Keep up the good work." He stepped away from the mic and turned to shake the hands of the officers standing behind him.

The family was hurried back inside to wait for the reporters to clear out. Ricky joined them.

"Dad," young Eric said quickly. "Thanks for stepping in."

"No problem. I had no concern that you couldn't handle it, but I felt urged to step in and take control of the day, and so I did. Besides, I wanted them to know that I too had experience with losing someone." He smiled down at Jordan. "And you, young lady, totally rocked it."

She giggled. "He made me so mad. But really, that was scary."

The family laughed.

"Well, I'm very proud of you," Bree said.

"Yeah, you were awesome," Taylor said.

Young Eric pulled out his phone and glanced at the time. "Dad, I have to get going if I'm gonna meet Nick on time."

Ricky nodded. "Mind if Agent Trout tags along?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't mind, but do you really think it's necessary?"

"Not really. But, it might take me a minute to let go of the tight hold I've had on you over the past few days."

"Well, then if you're not busy, why don't *you* come along?"

Ricky smiled. "I'd like that."

"And I'm gonna drop Jordan off at her mother's house first. Let her visit for a while," young Eric said.

"I guess she's gonna need her car back," Ricky offered. "Before she starts back to her normal life, let's get our guys to pick up her car, do a thorough check of everything, and make sure the bad guys weren't able to get something on there that we haven't noticed."

Young Eric nodded his head. "Good idea. I'll get right on that."

"Okay, so, I'll meet you at the store in Hillcrest and we'll see what we can do for Mr. Sutter."

Young Eric looked into his father's eyes. "I'm glad you're coming."

His father smiled. "Feelin' a little clingy there, son?"

"I guess, if you have to put a name on it, though that's not such a nice one, so, thanks a lot."

Ricky chuckled. "It's normal. There's gonna be some recovery time needed from the trauma you faced. There's a bunch of stages to go through with fancy names. One of the many symptoms is to feel like you don't want to handle things alone, or feel like you can't handle them alone. But you'll get through it. Give it time. Eric, twenty-four hours ago you were arriving at a hospital, having just been through the fight of your life. It takes time."

"Okay. Well, what happens after this stage?"

Ricky laughed. "I could tell you, but it would only piss you off."

Eric's eyes narrowed as he thought. "That was a clue?"

Ricky smiled, nodded.

"Anger?"

"Very good."

"Well, I don't feel any anger right now. Just gratitude."

"Cool. Now, let's get on the road."

"Yes, sir."

Over an hour later young Eric dropped Jordan off at her mother's house, promising to come back after his meeting, and warning them that his father will probably want to come see them too since he's in the area. There was an Ameritech agent in front of the house and Eric went to speak with him.

"Agent Wyatt?"

The agent got out of his car, shook Eric's hand. "Good to see you, Eric. How ya feelin'?"

"I'm good. A little tired. But it's nice to be able to walk around of my own free will."

"I bet. Me and the guys, we were sick with worry. We did a lot of praying and we're all really grateful to God that you and Josie are okay. I was really sick over Josie."

"You were at the school that day?"

"Yes. And the moment the alarm went off, we tried to get in. We'd already made arrangements with the school that we'd be allowed in for any emergency at any time. But the resource officer was new and apparently didn't get the memo, and by the time we got past him, Josie was already gone. When we got the news that you'd fought your way out and had Josie with you, I dropped to my knees that very moment."

Young Eric nodded thoughtfully. "That's a lot of weight to carry on your back. So, you're still assigned to watch over them?"

"Yes, for a little while, just to make sure things go back to normal with no problem and no fear for little Josie."

"Well, thanks for that."

"No need for thanks. It's my job. But, really, I've gotten pretty attached to these kids. Two of the nicest kids I've ever met. And there's a lot of other kids in this neighborhood, most of them from broken homes. Take a walk around here one day. The kids will come right up and talk to

you like they're just desperate to have a man pay some attention to them. It's sad."

"Which also makes them easy prey," young Eric said thoughtfully. "I wonder what we could do to help this situation? I mean, what kind of action could we take to help out the kids in this neighborhood?"

"Good question. Let me think about that and get back to you. I know you're a busy guy, so, maybe, if we come up with something, your family could provide the resources and I could take the lead. I've grown pretty fond of the kids here and I've been mulling over some things in my head."

"Agent Wyatt, I think that is really awesome. Get back to me." They shook hands and Eric left Jordan's home and went up to the convenience store to meet his father and Nick Sutter. He pulled up to the store next to his father's car and got out.

Ricky also got out of his car. "Where do you think he is?"

Young Eric shook his head. "Not sure. He's usually right over there on the side of the building. Let's go look around."

They moved around to the side of the building. Eric slowed and looked over the area where Nick was usually sitting, his back against the wall. He spotted a bouquet of wilted flowers, and then realized those were his flowers. He stopped, picked them up, looked up at his father. He had to put his hand on the side of the building to steady himself. His hands were shaking. His breath became labored.

"Take a few deep breaths, son. Slow, deep, that's right."

"I, uh, I didn't think that coming here would affect me this much."

Ricky nodded. "It's okay. Remember Taylor in the restroom at the gym?" He reached up and put his hand on young Eric's shoulder and said a quick prayer.

Eric immediately felt calmer. He swallowed. "Thanks, Dad. Let's, uh, let's go look back there," he said pointing toward the back of the store and a little wooded ravine area.

There was no one in the back of the store, but they thought they saw something blue in the wooded area and made their way through the underbrush.

"It's a tent," Ricky said. "It's several tents," he added.

They came into the clearing. "Nick?" young Eric called. "Nick Sutter? It's me, Eric. We had an appointment, remember?"

"Hold on," someone answered.

There was some stumbling or rustling and finally, Nick poked his head out of a small blue tent.

"Nick," Eric said quietly. "Remember me?"

"Yeah, you get me food. And, someone told me you got killed."

"Who told you that?"

"The guy at the store. He said you got yourself killed and that he was gonna have us arrested if we didn't leave his store."

Eric frowned. "Well, as you can see, I'm not dead. And this is my

father. Come on out and let's talk."

"Not sure about this."

"Okay, I understand. Well, are you hungry?"

"Yeah. We haven't eaten in a few days."

"We?"

"Yeah. There's five of us back here."

"Okay, well, all of you come on out and tell me what you'd like to eat and we'll be happy to go and get it for you."

Nick came out of his tent. And then two guys came out of another tent. And then a young guy and a pregnant girl came out of the third tent.

Both Ricky and young Eric smiled kindly at them all.

"Hello," young Eric said softly. "So, tell me what you'd like to eat and we'll get it for you."

"I'd really love a burger and some fries," one of the men said.

"Me too," the other said.

Ricky nodded. "You got it. Anyone else?"

"I'd like another one of the pizzas," Nick said with a smile.

Young Eric smiled back and nodded. "No problem."

"Would it be too much trouble for us to get a subway sandwich?" the young guy asked.

"Not at all. What kind?" Ricky asked.

"It doesn't matter. I mean, maybe with some veggies on it so she can eat something good for her."

"You got it. We'll be right back," young Eric said.

Thirty minutes later they returned with what they asked for and a whole lot more. Loaves of bread, peanut butter and jelly, a case of water. A large cooler filled with fruit. They also brought protein bars, granola bars, breakfast bars and three bags of cookies.

They sat in the clearing and ate their lunch together. Ricky and Eric both ate with them. They too had chosen the sub sandwich.

"So, Nick," young Eric began. "I told you, I wanted to talk to you to see what we could do to get you off the streets."

The others all looked up at Eric. He obviously had their interest.

Nick shook his head. "And I told you that I don't think that's gonna happen."

"And I told you that we should at least talk about it."

Nick nodded. "Except I ain't got nothin' to say."

"Okay. Well, let me just ask you this: how long have you been homeless?"

Nick sighed, shook his head. "I can't really remember now."

"How old are you?"

"I'm forty-two."

"Okay. Well, before you became homeless, where did you live?"

Nick laughed. "In an apartment with my wife and daughter."

That gave Eric pause for a moment. He nodded. "And can you

remember what made you leave that apartment?"

He blinked. Looked away. "They never came back."

"So, your wife left you?"

"Yeah. She left. My kid left too."

"How old was your daughter the last time you saw her?"

"She was five. Just started kindergarten."

"Just tell him," the pregnant girl said impatiently. "Just tell him what happened. I can't stand it when people play games."

Nick glared at her and then turned back to Eric with a shrug.

"They died. In a car accident."

"I'm sorry," Eric said softly.

"And so, he totally lost it," the pregnant girl said. "He lost his job, he lost his home, he lost his car. And he didn't care about any of that because all he wanted was to see his wife and kid again."

Eric smiled at her. "What's your name?"

"Destiny."

Eric's brows rose.

"Yeah," she said. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"I don't know if ironic is the right word. It depends on what you think your destiny is," Ricky put in.

"Well, from where I sit, it doesn't look like it's too good."

"This doesn't have to be your destiny, Destiny."

"Oh yeah, well who's gonna change this," she said, gesturing around at the area that had become her home.

"God will," Ricky said softly.

The girl sighed and Ricky could tell there was a God story in there somewhere. He smiled. "He sent us to change all this for you. But He's waiting on you to take the first step. So you just think about what that step needs to be." He turned back to young Eric and nodded for him to go on.

Eric looked at Nick. "So, Nick, what was your wife's name?"

"Teresa. And my little girl, her name was Resa, you know, sort of named after her mom."

"Do you remember how old you were when they died?"

"I was twenty-eight."

"So, you've been homeless about fourteen years. That's a long time."

"Yeah, and really, I don't care."

"Because your wife and daughter are dead, so what is there to live for?"

"Now you get it."

"I understand," Eric said instinctively instead of arguing with him.

"So," Ricky began. "You have nothing to live for, right? But, you're still alive, even after fourteen years, so something's keeping you alive. What's *really* holding you back from getting off the streets?"

"I don't got no money."

"If I were to offer you a job, would you take it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You don't understand."

"Maybe not. But try me."

"He can't hold onto a job," one of the other men said.

Ricky nodded. "Because?"

"Because he's strung out half the time."

"Mind your business," Nick warned.

"Look man, these guys are trying to help you. And you're throwing it back in their faces. And you're doin' that cuz you don't want to get clean."

"Because the drugs help the pain, right Nick?" Ricky asked.

Nick looked away.

"You're obviously broke. Where do you get the money to buy it?"

Nick sighed, stood and started to walk away.

"If you leave you may be throwing away the best chance for relief that ever came into your life," Ricky warned. "Nick. Let us help you. There are treatments now, where you can get off the drugs. Nick, what if I told you that I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you will see your wife and daughter again. They're just waiting on you to take a first step. Just one step. You do that, and God will take over. I promise you."

"You're just blowin' smoke."

"Maybe. But what if I'm not? What could it hurt to try? If you try and fail, you end up right back here, right? I'm telling you that if you work with us, you will feel happy again. You won't hurt anymore."

Nick's eyes filled and he turned and ducked inside his tent.

With Nick hiding inside his tent, young Eric looked at the other four people. "The offer stands to each of you. We want to help you, and we can. Tell us how you got to this point in your life, and what you wish could happen for you."

"I think it's pretty obvious," Destiny said. She looked at her boyfriend. "Alec and me, we got pregnant. He wanted to marry me, but my dad was real mad and he threw me out of the house. Then Alec's mom said he couldn't see me anymore. He needed to study hard, go to college and forget about me. And I really couldn't blame her for that. Alec was like at the top of his class. Graduated with honors last year. He was gonna go to college on a scholarship, and..."

"And?" Ricky said, turning to Alec.

He shrugged. "And, I love her and I'm not gonna forget about her or my child. I couldn't leave her. I told that to my mom, and she said if I don't obey her I could get out. So I did. I got a stupid job as a server in a restaurant, and we lucked out with a vacancy in a low-income housing project. But then my car got vandalized and I couldn't afford to get it fixed. So I went back to my mom and asked her, really begged her, if she would help me and she turned me down. So, I started taking the bus. But

the timing wasn't right and after my third time being late, I lost my job. And then, no one would hire me. And Desi tried to find a job, but she was showing and no one would hire her, and we couldn't pay our rent, and here we are. I should be in my first year of college right now, but, I couldn't just leave Desi. But, at least we have a tent, and some blankets and pillows that some guy brought for us."

"That was very kind of someone to do that," young Eric said. "But if you're willing to accept that help, would you consider letting us help you really get back on your feet? We can make it so you can finish school, go to college if you want, or trade school, or whatever. I mean, we can figure out what you want to do. And we can get Destiny some good medical attention for her and the baby. We can help you find a home. You just have to be willing to take some first steps. Are you willing?"

"Yes. I'd be crazy to turn that down. Obviously, I have no pride left. I'd do anything, especially for Destiny and our child. But why are you doing this?"

"Because..." He stopped, thought of what Jordan had said and smiled. "Because God waved His hand and placed you in front of us. And He has put it on our hearts to help you." He looked at the other two men. "All of you."

Ricky nodded and added. "But you have to put in the effort."

One of the other men narrowed his eyes as he stared at Ricky. "You look familiar. Have we met before?"

Ricky shook his head. "No."

Young Eric smiled. "My father's name is Ricky Kino. You may have heard of him."

Destiny drew a quick breath. "You know, I was thinking he looked just like Ricky Kino, but thought that was too crazy to be real," she said.

Alec nodded his head. "Me too. Wow. Ricky Kino." He looked at young Eric. "So, you're Eric, and your sister is Taylor Kino, right?"

He smiled. "Yes. Why? Do you know her?"

"No, just know of her. I mean, what guy doesn't?"

When Ricky and Eric didn't answer, Alec looked up, his eyes wide. "Oh, like, I didn't mean any disrespect. Destiny also knows about her, right Desi?"

She giggled. "Yes."

"How old are you two?" Ricky asked.

"I'm eighteen. Desi is seventeen."

"What school did you go to?"

"We both went to Hillcrest High School," Alec said.

"I used to be a cheerleader, and Alec was senior class president last year. He graduated. I won't. I'm supposed to be a senior right now," Destiny added.

Ricky nodded. "Okay. Well, you two kids are definitely coming back with me for the night. Then we'll find you a place and start on getting

your lives turned around." He looked at the other two men. Both older.

"What're your names?"

"I'm Jerry. This is my buddy Arnie."

"How long have you two been on the street?" Ricky asked.

"Oh, I'd say goin' on thirty years," Jerry said.

"Wow."

"Yeah, we been survivin' a long time. I started on the streets when I got hooked on drugs. I'm clean now. Been clean for twenty years at least. But can't seem to find my way back. And Arnie here, he's a little bit, well, slow ya know. I sort of take care of him."

Ricky nodded. "Well, if you want help to get off the streets, have a real home, work a little bit to help earn your way, and have help taking care of your friend, you've got it."

"Arnie and me, we'd be mighty grateful for your help."

"Be grateful to God, because He's the one who sent us here. He loves you. And I have a feeling He has some plans for you. For all of you. Including Nick, who was the one God used to bring us here."

"Dad, I'm gonna go talk to Nick."

Ricky nodded. "While he does that, let's talk about some concrete arrangements. Jerry, do you and Arnie want to get out of your tents right now, today, or do you want to take some time to think it over?"

"Where would we go if we leave today?" Jerry asked.

"There are several shelters in the area run by the *Heal the World Foundation*. They're clean. You have your own bed but would have to share a room, so you and Arnie would be together. Meals are provided. There are showers and linens provided. You would be asked to help in some way. Like, help cook, or do dishes, or take out the trash, easy stuff like that. The best thing is they're run by good people. You'd be interviewed when you first get there, and you can tell them if you have any health issues where you might need to see a doctor. That kind of thing. Everyone there is taught to be in service. That means, help others and don't focus on your own problems. It's only a place to stay until you're able to get on your feet. And there are counselors to help you figure out the best way to do that, however, I will also help you with that, because you are under my wing now."

"Ya know, this sounds almost too good to be true," Jerry said, as tears formed in his eyes.

Ricky smiled kindly. "If you want to leave today, I can arrange it. You might want to pack things, clean up your area. Leave things better than when you found them."

"I can do that."

"Then you *do* want to leave today?"

"Yes, sir. Just the pleasure of seeing Arnie rest his head on a real bed. That will be worth it all."

Ricky nodded, stood, and pulled out his phone. "Okay, then, let me

make some phone calls." He walked away as he called the manager of the greater Los Angeles shelters to begin finding a vacancy.

Inside Nick's tent, young Eric wasn't having as much success. Though Nick did begin to share some personal information. They learned that on Saturday, when young Eric was taken, Nick had been pretty gone on heroin. He also transported drugs for some local dealers in exchange for his personal supply.

"Nick, I can take you outta here, right now. Today," Eric said. "There's a place I can take you where they have medication-assisted treatment. They'll use meds to help ease your symptoms as you go through the withdrawal process. I will take care of all the arrangements. Please, Nick, let me help you. I understand how much you loved your family. And they were taken from you and they are in the arms of Jesus."

"You really believe that stuff?"

"I know it. I've been given too many signs, seen too many miracles. God is real, Nick. I promise you that He is. And if you turn your life over to Him, He can work a miracle in your life, and you'll begin to see. Just try. Try for one month. One month and if you don't feel a thousand percent better, then you can take off. But Nick, believe. Open your mind and believe. Do that and you'll see your wife and daughter again. That's the whole reason Jesus was born. To overcome death and pain and hell. And He did. He overcame it. He said, 'These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.' What harm could it do to at least try?"

"Medical assisted treatment, huh?"

"Yes."

"No withdrawal?"

"There will be withdrawal, but it will be bearable because they will give you drugs to help with the symptoms. You can do this."

Nick nodded. "Okay. I'll give it a try. But give me a day. Give me a day to pack up my stuff and get my mind right."

Eric nodded. "Fine. A day. I'll be back here tomorrow afternoon."

"I'll be ready."

Young Eric extended his hand. Nick shook it.

"Why do you care so much?" Nick asked.

"God sent me to you. He loves you. And because of that, I love you. I'll serve God and you in any way I can. That's just how it is."

Eric walked out of the tent to see what his father had accomplished.

"These two are coming home with me tonight, and Angel is arranging for a place for them to stay at one of her teen pregnancy shelters."

Young Eric nodded. "Are you still thinking about stopping by to see Jordan's family? I, uh, told them you would and they're pretty excited about it. I guess I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, that's okay. Yes, I'll stop by. I'm sure these guys won't mind if

we make a stop, will you?" Ricky asked looking at them.

"No, sir, not at all," Destiny said.

Alec came out of their tent and dumped a bunch of bags at their feet. "That's everything," he said.

"What about the tent?" Ricky asked.

"Well, I thought I might leave it. I left a note saying whoever finds it can have it."

Ricky nodded. "Eric, help these kids get their stuff into the trunk of my car."

"Yes, sir."

A few minutes later Ricky looked at his phone and then spoke to Jerry. "Your ride is about to pull up.

They looked as a black SUV pulled around the side of the store and parked at the back curb.

Ricky walked out of the woods and went to shake the driver's hand. "Someone call for a ride," Agent Bryant said with a smile.

"Dad, you got Ameritech to act as a cab?" young Eric chided.

"I was on the phone to Angel looking for a place for the kids there, and Jason was listening, and I mentioned I was about to get an Uber for these guys, then Jason said he had an agent coming back from an assignment down south of here and he could have him stop by. So, I accepted."

Young Eric chuckled. He nodded at Jerry and Arnie. "Hey guys, I'm really glad you've decided to get help." He offered his hand. "It was nice to meet you."

"Thank you, young man, for your kindness."

"Oh, Agent Bryant, let me get this cooler of fruit. Take it to the shelter too," Ricky said.

"I'll get it Dad," young Eric said quickly.

Fruit loaded up, a few minutes later, Jerry and Arnie were driving away to a new life. Young Eric and his father took a few minutes to say goodbye to Nick, promising to see him again the next day.

Alec and Destiny were loaded in the back seat of Ricky's car. Young Eric glanced up at his father. He was frowning. "What's wrong, Dad?"

Ricky shook his head. "I don't like it. I don't like Nick staying here another day. That's exactly when something bad will happen."

Eric smiled. "Uh, yeah, in the movies."

Ricky nodded. "Well, movies mirror real life, and vice versa." He pulled out his phone and called Jason.

"Rick, didn't I just speak with you?" Jason quipped.

Ricky laughed. "Yep. I wanna hire two agents. ASAP."

"Okay, hold on, cuz Joey's on call right now."

Ricky waited a minute.

"Dad, I'm gonna head on to Jordan's house. See you there."

Ricky nodded. "I'll be right behind you."

"Okay, Rick, Joey's on the line, go ahead," Jason said.

"Joey, I wanna hire two agents, ASAP to watch out for a homeless guy who has promised to meet us here tomorrow to go in and get clean. He's been doing some transport for local dealers, and I'm thinkin' he put us off to let them know he won't be around to help them anymore. They're not gonna like that and it could get ugly. I just wanna keep this guy alive until we get him tomorrow."

"Copy that. I'm guessing we're talking about Nick Sutter, down at the convenience store in Hillcrest?"

"Yes, but he's in a tent back in the woods behind the store. And I don't want him to know that we're watching him, because he might get spooked and not meet us tomorrow."

"Then we'll need discretion and camo. Got it. ETA, one hour."

"Thanks Joey."

"You're very welcome Grandmaster Kino."

"Jason, sorry to bother you."

"I'm always here for ya, Ricky."

✞✞✞

Deuteronomy 15:11

"For there will never cease to be poor in the land.
Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand
to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'"

Chapter Two

October 22nd, Tuesday Afternoon
Perez Home, Hillcrest, California

When young Eric pulled back up to Jordan's house, there was a very pleasant scene taking place. Agent Wyatt knelt down in the small drive talking with a group of kids who'd apparently just stepped off the school bus, because they had backpacks and school uniforms. They were laughing and then they high-fived the agent.

Agent Wyatt saw Eric pull up and moved the children out of the driveway so he could pull in.

When young Eric got out of the car he approached the group. "I see you have some new friends, Agent," he said.

"Oh, yeah. These are my buddies. Kids, this is..."

"I know who it is," one of the boys said proudly. "It's Eric Kino and Ricky Kino is his father."

Eric smiled. "Hello, everyone. Did you have a good day at school?"

"Yes," they all said.

"What happened to your face?" the first boy who'd spoken asked.

"I, uh, I got into a fight."

There was a murmur of "ooohhhs."

"Did ya win?" another boy asked.

"I did." Eric looked at Agent Wyatt. "I need to go inside and sit for a minute. You guys have fun."

"Feelin' puny?"

"Yep. Real tired."

"Need help?"

"No, I can make it."

"You're sweating pretty bad."

"Yep." He swayed.

Agent Wyatt grabbed his arm. "Excuse me, kiddos, but Eric's not feeling too well. Be right back."

He helped Eric to the house. Jordan opened the door and immediately ushered him inside.

"Three? What's wrong?"

"Suddenly so tired. Can I lie down a minute?"

"Yes, of course." She put her arm around his waist. "I've got him, Agent Wyatt. Thank you for your help."

"Call me if you need me. I'll be out front."

"I will. Thanks."

Jewell Perez clapped her hands at Josie and Jamie. "Josie, get him a glass of lemonade. Jamie, get him a couple of cookies."

Jordan led Eric down the hall to her and Josie's bedroom. She sat him on the side of her bed. "Do I need to call Jeffy?"

"I don't think so. I'm just suddenly so tired. I need to close my eyes."

"Mom says for him to drink this," Josie said as she handed him the glass with pictures of lemons on it.

He smiled and took the glass and drank.

"And she said for you to eat this," Jamie said as he handed him one of the oatmeal cookies.

Eric nodded. "You don't have to talk me into eating your mom's cookies," he said as he took a bite.

He finished one cookie and drank the lemonade.

"Okay, now, lie down," Jordan ordered as she took the glass from him.

Sighing, he did as he was told. Jordan went to the end of the bed and took his shoes off. "Josie, go get me the throw from off the sofa."

She obeyed immediately and Jordan gently pulled it over him, then knelt down by the twin bed and brushed her hand through his thick, dark hair. "How's that? Feel any better?"

"Yes. Don't know what happened. I drove up, got out of the car and suddenly felt like I wanted to just lie down on the driveway."

"Mom thinks your blood sugar might be low."

"I didn't eat much breakfast. So maybe. But I just want to close my eyes for a few minutes, okay?"

"Yes, of course. We'll let you rest." She kissed his forehead.

"That won't do," he complained.

She laughed softly and kissed his lips. He closed his eyes. She rose and ushered her siblings out of the room.

He opened his eyes. "Hey, Dad will be here any minute, and he has two homeless kids with him. Can you take care of them until I get up? I just need about fifteen minutes."

Jordan smiled. "Don't worry. We'll take care of your dad and the kids. Sounds like an interesting story."

He sighed. "It is." He turned onto his side, snuggled his head against Jordan's pillow and fell immediately to sleep.

"How is he?" Jewell asked as Jordan came back into the kitchen.

"He's resting. Thanks, Mom. Uh, Mr. Kino will be here any minute and Three says he has two homeless kids with him."

"Oh! Well, okay. No problem. I have another batch of cookies coming out of the oven now, and one more batch to go in, so there will be plenty."

"Okay. And I'm gonna go sit with Eric."

As Ricky Kino drove up to the tiny house, he was surprised to see Agent Wyatt standing in the tiny front yard, talking to a bunch of children. "Hmm, wonder what's going on here," he said to his two

passengers.

"Looks like a neighborhood gathering," Alec said. "So, this house is the home of your son's girlfriend?"

"Yes. It's actually my first time at their house."

"It's a tiny little house," Destiny said. "Not what I expected when you said you have to stop by your son's girlfriend's home."

Ricky smiled at her, because he knew what she was saying. "Money doesn't make the person, Destiny. It's what's in the heart, the character, the soul. The people who live in this house, though life has been a struggle for them, are some of the finest people I know. And that may be because life has been a struggle for them and they still stayed loving and positive and strong."

Destiny and Alec nodded. "Would you like us to stay in the car and wait?" Alec asked.

"No, of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Well, we're kinda not, uh, very presentable, is how my mom would put it."

"Yeah, that's probably what they thought about Jesus. Come on," he said as he opened his door and got out.

Ricky immediately walked over to Agent Wyatt. "Hello, Agent." He held out his hand. Wyatt shook it. The kids became totally silent as they stood in awe looking at the movie star.

"Kids, I guess you know who this is," Agent Wyatt said.

"It's Ricky Kino!" a boy cried.

Ricky smiled at them.

"You should address him as Grandmaster Kino," Agent Wyatt chided. The kids got silent again. "And you should bow to him, like this," the agent quickly demonstrated.

The children all did as he showed them. Ricky stood very still and then bowed to them. "Hello, everyone. It's an honor to get to meet you."

"I told Jamie that I didn't believe him that he knew you."

"Hmm, I guess you'll have to apologize to Jamie."

The boy nodded.

"And these are my two friends, Alec and Destiny," Ricky said.

Alec smiled and Destiny gave a small wave. "Hi," she mumbled.

"Well, we're gonna go in and visit with the Perez family."

"Awww, please stay and play with us."

"You guys have to get home," Agent Wyatt put in. "Your parents are gonna come looking for you because they know the bus has already come and you're gonna be in trouble."

"Awww," the children moaned.

"What if I come back on Saturday and you get your parents to bring you to the park and we'll play some football?" Agent Wyatt offered.

"Yaaay, that would be great," the kids said.

"Could you come too, Grandmaster Kino?" one of the boys asked.

He grimaced. “I’m not sure. Let me check my schedule and see if I can make that happen. It may have to be in the morning.”

“That’s okay!” the boy said quickly.

“Still, I’ll need to check my schedule. Now, Agent Wyatt, who is a very good friend of mine, says you need to hurry home. So, you guys do that.” He bowed. “It was very nice to meet you all.”

They bowed again.

Ricky turned and headed into the house with Alec and Destiny right behind. “That was sweet,” Jewell said as she opened the door for her guests.

Ricky laughed. “Yep. Kids are awesome.” He paused, motioned behind him. “Mrs. Perez, this is Alec and Destiny. They were homeless until today. And we’re gonna help them get on their feet.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Jewell said. She frowned. “Mr. Kino, uh, I mean, Ricky, young Eric wasn’t feeling well and he went to take a nap. You might want to go check on him.”

Ricky frowned. “Thank you, I will.” He quickly glanced around the tiny home. It consisted of a small front room, dining area, kitchen, and he saw a hallway with four doors.

“It’s down the hall, the second door on the left,” Jewell directed.

He headed that way.

“Please, Alec and Destiny, let me get you some of my famous lemonade and oatmeal cookies. Have a seat and I’ll get it.”

“Let me help you,” Destiny said.

Jewell nodded. “Alec, we’ll be right back.”

Alec nodded and sat and smiled up at the two children. “Hello.”

“Hi. I’m Jamie. And this is my sister, Josie and she got kidnapped from school yesterday so we got to stay out of school today, but mom says we gotta go back tomorrow.”

“Uh, wow. Well, nice to meet you. Josie? That must’ve been pretty scary.”

She nodded. “It was. But Eric saved me.”

“I see.”

“It was on the news,” Jamie said, as if the guy should have known.

“Oh, well, I don’t have a TV.”

“Why not?”

“Um, because I don’t have a house.”

“Oh. Well, that’s sad. Where do you stay?”

“We’ve been living in a tent in the woods, but the Kinos are gonna help us find a place to live.”

“They’re really nice. I love them,” Josie said. “And my sister is in love with Eric. But she calls him Three.”

“Three?”

“Yeah, cuz in their family there’s three Erics. Ricky Kino’s real name is Eric. Bet you didn’t know that.”

"No, I didn't," Alec said with a laugh.

"Here we go," Jewell said as she and Destiny came in with a plate of just-baked cookies and two glasses of lemonade.

✝✝✝

Ricky quietly opened the door to the bedroom. Jordan knelt beside his son, stroking her hand over his hair. She looked up at him.

"Hi, Mr. Kino. He said he felt so tired he could just lie down in the driveway. Agent Wyatt had to help him in the house. My mom had him drink some lemonade and eat a cookie, thinking his blood sugar might be low. He ate it and fell right to sleep. Do you think he needs a doctor?"

"Not sure. But I do know he needs to rest. He really should've stayed in bed all day. This trip down here to see Nick, he felt he had to take. And I agreed with him. But it's obviously been too much, especially with the stress of the press conference. I'm gonna try to get him to sleep for the next few days."

Jordan nodded. "What can I do to help?"

"You, young lady, can go back to school, and back to practice and take care of business so that he's not worried about you."

She sighed and nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll do that. Can I come home with him and stay with him one more night? I think he needs me. He's having nightmares."

Ricky nodded. "Yes. That's fine. Let me have a word with him."

She stood. "Okay, I'll be out here if you need me."

He smiled. "Got it."

Jordan left the room and Ricky leaned over his son. "Eric?"

When he didn't respond, he patted his shoulder. "Eric."

His eyes fluttered open. "Dad?" He sat up.

"You okay, Eric?"

"Yes, sir. Just needed to close my eyes for a few minutes."

"Are you sure that's all it is? Any other symptoms? Dizziness? Confusion?"

Young Eric laughed softly. "No more than usual."

"Are you ready to face the rest of the day?"

He swung his feet over the side of the bed. "Yes, sir. How long have I slept?"

"No more than about fifteen, twenty minutes."

He nodded. "That's all I needed. I feel much better."

"Okay. Well go to the bathroom and splash some water on your face and come on out."

"Yes, sir."

Ricky made his way back to the small living room and sat on the sofa next to Alec. Jewell jumped up immediately from her chair and went to get him a glass of lemonade. She came back and handed it to him. "My special lemonade. I hope you like it."

"Thank you, Jewell."

Jordan picked up the plate of cookies and offered him one. “These are mom’s famous oatmeal cookies. She makes them with all organic oats, raisins, and walnuts, almond flour and coconut oil.”

Ricky laughed. “Thanks, Jordan, for knowing I’d appreciate knowing that.” He grabbed up a couple of cookies and took a bite. “Umm, now that is really good. Jewell, you’ll have to add these to the restaurant menu.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you like them. I was thinking I’d make up several dozen for the memorial on Friday.”

Ricky frowned. “That would be a lot of work.”

“Oh, I don’t mind. I want to help.”

He nodded. “Well, then, I’ll compromise. Your cookies will be welcome if you let me pay for the ingredients.”

She looked into his eyes and saw he wouldn’t be denied. She nodded. “Okay. It’s a deal. You’re a hard man to work with,” she joked.

He laughed. “Most people say I’m agreeable and lighthearted.”

Young Eric entered the room. “That is only what they say to his face,” he quipped. He grabbed a chair from the dining room, turned it backwards and took a seat, his arms folded across the back of the chair. Jordan immediately went to him, stood behind him and gave him a quick hug. “You okay?”

He nodded. “Yep. Sorry about that. Just couldn’t keep my eyes open.”

“Well, we’re gonna get you home and you’re going straight to bed,” Ricky said firmly.

“Uh, so,” Destiny spoke up. “What exactly happened to you? I mean, I heard that some guys pushed you into a van and took off with you. Nick told us that.”

“Well, they drugged me. They put a needle in my neck and knocked me out. They took me to Mexico and held me for ransom. And they took Josie from her school,” he added, glancing at the quiet girl. “To make sure my father paid the ransom. But I fought my way out. And Josie and I got back to a hospital a little over twenty-four hours ago. So, I’m just a little tired.”

“And he has an infection from a knife wound and he has a concussion,” Jordan added.

Eric shrugged. “I’m okay.”

“All that, and you came down here today to meet with Nick?” Alec asked.

“Well, I was grateful to be able to get away and actually be able to come to the meeting and I didn’t want to leave Nick hanging. I wanted to keep my promise. If I didn’t, he may be lost.”

“Why is Nick so important to you?”

“Because God waved his hand and put him in my path,” he said, turning to smile up at Jordan. “And that means he’s important to God. And the same thing goes for you. So, I’m a little tired. Big deal.”

“Do you mind if I ask how you and Jordan met?”

"He stopped on the highway to help me change a tire," Jordan said.

Destiny smiled. "A knight in shining armor."

"Everything happens for a reason," Eric said. "Jordan and I were meant to be together. And if I hadn't met her, I wouldn't have met Nick and if I hadn't met Nick, we wouldn't have met you guys. God is so awesome. He has a plan. It seems random. But it's not."

Ricky smiled at his son.

"You guys are pretty amazing people," Destiny said softly.

"God is amazing," Ricky corrected. "Well, seeing as how young Eric is so tired, we might have to cut this visit short, Jewell, but we'll talk again soon. I'm gonna send you some money on the phone for some cookie supplies, and then I'll see you Friday."

He rose. "Jamie, Josie, be good for your mom," Ricky admonished.

They both bowed to him and he bowed back.

Young Eric also rose and put his chair back in the dining room. Josie came to him and he hugged her. "Hey, sweet girl, you okay?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes, but I wish you didn't have to go."

"You can FaceTime me as much as you'd like. If you have any bad dreams or feel sad or afraid, just FaceTime me, no matter what time it is. Even if it's in the middle of the night. Okay?"

She nodded and buried her face against his abdomen, making him wince. He hugged her tight. "I'll see you on Friday, right? Cuz Grandma said you are really good at entertaining the little ones."

Josie smiled. "They love me."

He laughed. "I'm sure they do, and I love you too."

Everyone started shaking hands or hugging family members and making their way out to the cars.

"Three, maybe I should drive," Jordan said.

He nodded, handed her the keys, and they headed off to the Kinos' home.

✝✝✝

October 22nd, Tuesday Early Evening

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"Hello, hello, welcome to our home," Bree said cheerfully.

Both Alec and Destiny merely stared up at Bree.

Bree smiled and held her hand out to Destiny. "What's your name?"

"Oh, I'm uh, Destiny. I forgot that Ricky Kino is married to Breanna Adams. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Adams."

"It's Kino," Bree corrected.

"Oh, sorry, Mrs. Kino. Wow, you are so beautiful."

She smiled. "Thanks, and so are you!" She turned to Alec, who hadn't yet closed his mouth. "And your name is?"

"I'm Alec."

"Well, it's very nice to meet you both." She smiled kindly. "I know things have been difficult for you, but everything is about to change, so

don't you worry about a thing. Not anymore. Now, I imagine you'd both like to take a shower and put on some clean clothes."

"Um, we have our clothes, but they haven't been washed in a very long time," Destiny said.

"Well, then, no worries, I'll take care of that. Until your own clothes are clean, I think we can rustle up something for both of you to wear. So, just follow me upstairs and we'll get you settled."

They looked at each other, eyebrows raised and followed the Oscar-winning movie star through the house and up the stairs. At the top of the staircase she turned left. She passed the first door on the left, because if Gabe stayed over again, he'd be in there. She went down the hall toward the end.

"So, are you two married?"

Alec looked down. "Um, no, ma'am. Not yet anyway."

Bree nodded. "Okay, then I'll give you separate rooms." She opened the next to the last door on the right. "Destiny, why don't you take this room?"

They walked into the room and Destiny gasped. It was like something out of a designer magazine. A big beautiful bed done in grays and whites. Large dresser. A desk and chair. And two large chairs facing a larger bay window that looked out over the front lawn. Bree walked into the bathroom. "There's body wash and shampoo and conditioner. There's more towels on the console right there. And there's a robe right there on the back of the door."

Destiny nodded.

"Where are your clothes that need washing?"

"Uh, so, they're in that overnight case right over there and then that Hillcrest High gym bag."

"Alec, will you just set those outside the door for me?"

He did immediately.

"Okay, Destiny, make yourself at home and when you get all cleaned up and dressed, come on back downstairs because I know Taylor and Gabe are gonna want to meet you."

Destiny nodded her head.

"Now, Alec, you come with me." She led him down to the last bedroom on the right, which was just the next bedroom past Destiny's. "Pretty much the same setup so just make yourself at home. There's a robe on the back of your bathroom door as well. Hmm," she said as she opened a few drawers. "Ah yes, here's a razor, and—here's some fresh blades." She opened a cabinet. "And here's some shaving cream and aftershave, in case you're wanting to shave. If not, that's okay too."

He smiled. "I would love to shave," he said as he ran his hand over the scruffy mess on his face.

"Fine then. We'll do some shopping and get whatever else you might need, but I'm sure just getting cleaned up will make you feel so much

better."

"Mrs. Kino?"

She smiled. "Yes?"

"I can't thank you enough."

"It's my pleasure," she said quickly. "See you downstairs."

"Yes, ma'am."

✝✝✝

Alec stared at his reflection in the mirror. He was clean and it felt really good. He definitely needed a haircut, he thought as he ran his hand through the shaggy brown mop. He'd lost weight. He was tan. He leaned forward and squinted at his face. He'd lost his glasses the day some guy punched him outside the LA shelter, but he could see well enough for now. He wore some black sweatpants and a black t-shirt and he figured it was Gabe Tanner who loaned him the clothes because the shirt said "Team Gabe" on the front. Alec had actually seen that tournament last spring. That was before his life had completely fallen apart, and it was his fault that it had. He had no one to blame. He'd taken his girlfriend to the prom, ended up in a room one of his friends had reserved at the hotel, and was now paying for his night of pleasure. He messed up. Still, no matter what, he was not gonna leave his girl and his child, like his own father had left him. When Desi's parents threw her out of the house, if his own mother would have taken her in, he could have still gone on to school this fall. Unfortunately, his mom was only focused on him being distracted by Desi and the pregnancy. She'd wanted him to forget her so that he didn't mess up his scholarship. But it was messed up anyway. What she didn't think about was if she had offered to allow Desi to live with her, he would have been able to concentrate on school. Drawing a deep breath, he left the room and went to the room next door.

Destiny sat on the edge of the bed, combing out her long, blond hair. She looked up at him and he smiled at her. That hair was one of the things that had drawn his eye to her a year ago. That gorgeous hair was stick straight and came to the middle of her back. It was cut straight across. And it shimmered as she walked. It was silky and smooth and all he'd wanted to do was touch it. Feel it. She'd flipped her head and glanced at him in the lunchroom. She was a junior. It was game day, a little over a year ago. She had on her little cheerleader uniform and was talking to other cheerleaders who were seated at the table.

He'd made the first move. He wasn't shy. He was the senior class president. He knew everyone and everyone knew him. At the time he was almost a sure thing to be the valedictorian the following spring. But he'd lost his mind over this girl. No one, not anyone would've thought he'd end up living in a tent in the woods, behind a convenience store. He shook his head to keep his mind from wandering and sat next to her on the bed.

"Feel better?"

She nodded. "It feels so good to be clean."

"You smell really good."

"I know, right?" she said as she tugged on a tangle.

"Here, let me," he said and took the comb from her hand.

She turned slightly and he gathered her hair to the back and gently combed out all of the tangles.

When he finished she stood and faced him. "So, how do I look?"

He looked her over. She wore white joggers and an orange t-shirt that said "Brookside Tigers" on the front. "You look adorable. I guess those are Taylor's clothes."

"Ya think? And I'm guessing those are Gabe Tanner's clothes?"

He laughed. "Ya think?"

She sighed. Frowned.

"You okay, Desi?"

She nodded. "I feel like I'm in a dream. Like nothing is real."

He patted the bed. "Sit down." She sat and he took her hands. "We got used to living in that tent, right?"

"Yes."

"Before that, we got used to living in that apartment, right?"

"Yes. But it's not exactly how I expected my life to go."

He nodded, swallowed down the emotions that welled up. "I'm sorry, Desi. If I could take it back, if we could go back to that night, I'd change it. But I swear, I'm gonna figure this out. And I'm never gonna leave you. And I'm gonna marry you. And I'm gonna be a father to our child. I just have to figure it out."

"Well, Ricky Kino said he could get you into school. So, do you want to go back to school?"

"Yes. I want to make something of myself. But I'm not sure what direction to take anymore. I mean, I had it all figured out. I'd earned a full-tuition academic scholarship to USC. From there I was gonna go to law school. Hopefully, Stanford Law. I had a paid internship already lined up at Jenkins and Savage, the tenth-ranked law firm in California. But I've blown it all, Desi. But somehow I'll figure it out. I promise. And we'll have a good life."

She smiled and stood. "Come on, let's go downstairs and meet *the* Gabe and Taylor phenoms!"

He smiled. "Don't go makin' gaga eyes at him."

She laughed. "Jealous?"

"Not yet."

She gasped and put her hands to her abdomen, then smiled. "The baby is excited too!" she giggled.

He put his hand on her belly. Looked into her eyes and smiled at the small nudging against his palm. "So cool," he said.

Destiny and Alec headed down the stairs to meet *the* Gabe and Taylor, but pulled up short near the bottom. In front of them was a large breakfast bar island and on the other side of that, in the middle of a giant kitchen,

were two movie stars standing face to face. She had her arms up around his neck, and he had his arms around her waist and she was smiling up at him. He was saying something but they couldn't hear what that was. The two turned their faces and looked at them, then dropped their arms to their sides.

"Hello," Ricky Kino said.

"Hi," Alec returned.

Destiny smiled.

"Feel better?" Breanna Adams asked.

"Yes, so much better," Destiny said.

"Gabe and Taylor are in the den," Ricky said, pointing behind him. "They're waiting to meet you."

"Go on in to the den, dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes," Bree said.

They nodded and headed toward the den. When they entered, Gabe and Taylor stopped kissing and jumped to their feet. Gabe immediately moved forward, hand extended.

"Hey! You must be Alec! So nice to meet you."

Alec shook hands, trying hard not to stare. He was not one to be star-struck. But this guy, who was the same age as Alec had like, a bright light glowing around his whole body. It was so surreal. He was a little taller and a little larger than Alec. His smile was bright. His eyes shining. "Wow, I can't believe I'm meeting you," Alec said softly.

Gabe shook his head. "Nothin' special about me. Just a normal guy."

Alec shook his head. "There's nothing normal about you." He looked down at Desi. "Um, this is Destiny."

Gabe smiled at her, nodded and offered his hand. She took it and smiled up at him. "Hi. Call me Desi. Everyone does."

"Nice to meet you, Desi," Gabe said.

Desi stared up at him. His voice was strong, powerful, sure. He was absolutely different in person than on his videos. She could feel the power emanating from him.

"Hey Desi," Taylor said brightly. "I'm Taylor."

Desi grinned. "Oh, I know. Wow, you are even more beautiful in person than on the internet."

"Don't be silly," Taylor said with a giggle. "But I gotta say, you look very cute in my school colors."

Desi laughed, put her hand on her swollen belly. "I hardly qualify as cute anymore."

"Uh, yes you do. You're adorable. I got the shirt from my brother because I thought you might need a little more room. When are you due?"

She looked over at Alec. "Um, we think maybe about the end of January."

"Oh! So, you haven't been to a doctor. Well, we'll fix that all up." Taylor turned to Alec and held out her hand. "Hi, Alec, I didn't mean to

be ignoring you. It's nice to meet you too!"

He nodded and shook her hand. "You two, well, you guys are great. I mean, thanks for the warm welcome."

"Come sit," Gabe said, motioning at the two couches. "We'd love to get to know you."

"Why?" Alec asked suspiciously.

Gabe smiled warmly. "Well, you're interesting. I mean, we've already been told that you were living in the woods in a tent behind the store. That had to be hard, especially in Desi's condition."

"I'm just so glad that my brother went down there today and you guys were there," Taylor said. "How long have you been in that tent behind the store?"

"We've only been there for two weeks," Alec said.

"Where were you before that?" Gabe asked.

"We were up in Alameda. We got a ride from a trucker down here to Hillcrest because we were trying to get down to a friend I went to high school with who was gonna let us crash at his place. But when we got there, his roommate suddenly changed his mind and said 'no way.'"

Desi nodded. "Yeah, that was a bad day. I cried my eyes out."

"Neither of you have any family?"

Desi sighed. "My Dad threw me out of the house when I told my parents I was pregnant. That was back in the spring. A few weeks after prom."

"Oh, that is so sad," Taylor said as she reached over and hugged Desi.

"I think my mom is sad," Desi said. "I don't know what my dad is thinking. We used to be so close. He called me his little angel. I guess he was so disappointed in me that he couldn't stand to look at me. He told me I had to leave." She turned as tears welled in her eyes.

"How about *your* parents, Alec?" Gabe asked.

He sighed. "It's just my mom and me. My father left when I was nine. My mom is mad at me and I guess with good reason. I messed up. We've struggled since my dad left. Barely make ends meet. But I worked hard at school and had obtained a full-tuition academic scholarship to USC."

"Wow. You must be really smart," Gabe said.

He shrugged. "Apparently, I'm an idiot. I threw it all away. But, I love Desi. My mom wanted me to leave her, forget about her and the baby, turn my back and go to college. But I couldn't leave her. I couldn't turn my back on her like my father turned his back on me. And Desi had nowhere to go. She has two aunts who turned her away. A couple of her friend's parents let her move in for a few weeks, but then they said she couldn't stay. So I was able to beg some lady at the housing administration to push through our paperwork.

"I think she felt sorry for us, and she got us in for only a very small amount of rent. But then, I lost my car and my job and couldn't find any work and they put us out. We stayed a few nights in a local shelter

downtown LA, but felt we were better out on our own because it was dangerous there. I got in a fight with some strung out dude who wanted to put his hands on Desi. He busted me in the face and broke my glasses. It's been hell. Living in that tent was actually the best place so far. Some man and his wife came by and gave us pillows and blankets."

"Wait a minute," Gabe said. "So, you usually wear glasses?"

He nodded. "Yeah, but like, I mean, I can see. I'm not totally blind. I just can't see clearly and I get headaches now."

"Well, that is something I'm sure Mrs. Kino will take care of right away," Gabe stated firmly.

Alec shook his head in wonder. "You people are amazing. When your brother and father came by today, it was like, an answer to a prayer."

"Well, it was an answer to *our* prayer," Taylor said.

"What do you mean?" Desi asked.

"Every morning our family prays for God to put someone in our path, someone that He wants us to help. Today, it was you two. Very cool. And you're our age, so now, we also have some new friends!"

Desi shook her head in wonder. "So, do you think we'll be able to find a place to live, and Alec could actually get into school?"

"Oh, absolutely," Gabe said. "From here on out, life will be a blessing. Oh, you'll still have to work hard. But I guarantee, you'll never be homeless again. Not ever. You'll get into school, Alec. And you'll see a doctor, Desi, and if you want to finish high school, we'll make sure of it."

"We?"

"Well, Ricky Kino will make sure of it, but if he didn't, I would. If you know about me, then you know, I have my own foundation that helps young kids just like you. You guys, God loves you and has felt your pain and He wants us to help you. You will not fall through the cracks. From here on out, you're good. Don't forget to tell God how grateful you are."

Desi sniffed. "I will."

"Are you a Christian?" Taylor asked.

Desi nodded. "Well, my family goes to church every Sunday. We say we're Christians. But that didn't keep me from getting pregnant, did it? So, I guess I'm not a very good Christian."

"We all make mistakes," Gabe said. "No one is perfect."

"Thank you for that," Alec said.

"You don't have to thank us," Taylor said. "It's the truth. Life is hard. And I understand young love, cuz I'm so in love with Gabe." She stopped and smiled at him, and he smiled at her. "I mean, there have been times when we've come so close to being in the same predicament you're in."

Gabe's brow furrowed.

"Gabe?"

His head jerked around at the sound of Ricky Kino's voice. He was standing at the entrance to the den. Gabe's eyes opened wide and he shook his head.

"How close are we talkin'?" Ricky asked firmly.

Gabe swallowed. "Uh, I don't know why she said that. Not close at all, sir. I give you my word. I've only kissed her."

"Oh, Daddy, don't be so scary. I'm just talking about how Jesus said if you think about it, or like, imagine doing it, then it's like you've done it, and I've imagined it a bunch of times."

Ricky's lips pressed together to keep himself from smiling. Alec and Desi couldn't help but let out a small chuckle. Gabe didn't dare smile.

"Taylor, you and I need to have a talk," Ricky said. "But right now, dinner is ready," he announced. "We're eating at the kitchen table. Gabe, please run up and wake young Eric and Jordan and ask them to come down to dinner."

✝✝✝

October 23rd, Wee hours Wednesday Morning

Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Violet woke when she heard her phone buzz briefly. She turned toward her night table and reached to grab up her phone.

"Tell him yes you're awake and that Rose is now also awake," Rose grumbled.

"Sorry, Rosie," Vi said.

"I think I'm gonna move into Heather's old room."

"Oh, now, there's no need for that. Besides, that will hurt my feelings."

"Well, I wouldn't want to do that," Rose mumbled. "We'll talk later. Answer your man."

Violet smiled as she read the message.

~~Hey, Violet. Are you awake?

~Yes, and Rose says to tell you that now she is too :)

~~ Sorry. I just got back from the case in Alabama and I haven't seen you in almost two weeks and really need to see you.

~Where are you?

~~Just outside the gate.

~I'm on my way

~~Hurry

Grinning Violet jumped out of bed, pulled off her nightshirt and pulled on her jeans. Grabbing her bra and a t-shirt, she rushed into the bathroom, brushed her teeth and hair and finished dressing. She looked in the mirror to see if she was presentable.

Twenty-three-year-old Violet and Rose were identical twins, but in Violet's mind, they were completely different. Their personalities certainly were. Violet was a little shy, whereas Rose was brazen. Violet was more of a peacemaker, and Rose was, well, definitely the opposite. They both had blue eyes and blond hair, but Rose's hair was kept to about shoulder length, and it was sleek and straight. No nonsense. Vi's hair was

very long, down to the middle of her back, and wavy. They both were of medium height, and both were athletic and fit, though Rose was probably a little more muscular than Violet.

Violet pinched her cheeks to give them some color, nodded and went back into the bedroom, quietly grabbed her shoes and tiptoed out her bedroom door and down the stairs.

It was three in the morning and no one should be awake, but she peeked around the corner toward her father's office just in case he was up taking care of some emergency. It seemed the coast was clear. She quickly stole out the front door, sat on the porch steps, put her shoes on and took off running down the long drive.

Keegan Tanner rolled over and picked up his phone at the sound of the ding. Someone had opened the front door. He sighed and sent a text.

~Agent Blackmon, what are your intentions?

~~Sorry sir. I just needed to see her. I've been gone so long. I just want to speak to her for about fifteen minutes.

~Make sure you bring her back to the house yourself and see her safely inside.

~~Copy that, sir.

~Do you see her yet?

~~Yes, sir, I see her coming down the drive.

~I'm opening the gate. Make sure it's closed after you leave.

~~Will do.

~And btw, good job and welcome home.

~~Thank you, sir.

Keegan quietly placed his phone back on the night table, then rolled over to peer at his sleeping wife.

She'd had a bad night. Because of young Eric's kidnapping, she was unusually worried about Gabe. She'd started having contractions. Then Iris could sense her mother's worried state and started acting out. Thank goodness for Lily who'd always had a calming effect on Iris. The only other person better with Iris than Lily was Gabe. He was in big demand around here and Keegan wasn't sure how he was gonna be able to handle having his son gone for at least the next four years while he was training at Ameritech and going to school at USC.

The whole family seemed to be in mourning over the young man. Keegan suddenly wished he could turn back time and do Gabe's life here all over again. Children grow up so quickly, and time goes by in the blink of an eye. He sighed.

Lizzy turned over and opened her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, honey, go back to sleep."

She smiled. "Thank you, Keegan."

"For what?"

"For taking such good care of me and the children. I know I was a handful last night."

He chuckled. “Just last night?”

She smiled. “Very funny.”

He rolled over onto his side, pulled her back up close to him and placed his hand on her belly. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“I miss Gabe so much.”

“I know, sweetheart. I miss him too.”

“He’s such a bright light, ya know?”

“I know. But he has to share that light with the world.”

She sighed. “He’s not even gonna know these new babies. And Iris is gonna forget all about him.”

“Come on now, that’s not true. He’s gonna come home and visit as often as possible. Right now, let’s just be grateful that he’s in the arms of the Kinos out there in California. They love him and they’ll take good care of him.”

“I know they will. And he really wanted to be out there with Taylor. So I guess he’s happy.”

“And a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave unto his wife,” Keegan quoted.

“Don’t say that. Not yet. He’s still just a boy. And they’re not married.”

Keegan laughed softly. “I’m thinking he’ll always be just a little boy to you.”

She sniffed as the tears came again.

“Oh, now, Elizabeth,” Keegan said. “You have another son and daughter who are gonna need you. And you’ll see Gabe in December for Christmas.”

“Huh! What if he doesn’t want to leave Taylor during the holidays?”

Keegan frowned. “He promised you he’d be home for Christmas. Gabe will keep his word.”

She sniffed. Nodded. “I don’t know why I’m so weepy lately.”

He smiled. “Well, I do.”

“Well, aren’t you just so smart? But really, Keegan. First, I won’t be able to see Gabe fight in the Mini-MART, again. And then, I’ll only see him for a few days at Christmas before he has to go back and start school and JETT training.”

“First, I won’t be able to see him fight either.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not leaving you. I mean, you could go into labor anytime.”

She nodded. “I was worried about that, but I wasn’t gonna ask you to miss Gabe fighting.”

“Elizabeth, you giving birth is a lot more important than a martial arts tournament. We’re talking about two of God’s beautiful spirits being entrusted to our care. I will be by your side.”

“Thank you, honey.”

He kissed her neck. "You're welcome. And I've been thinking about something else."

"What?"

"I don't want you to get your hopes up, because they may not want to come, but, I was wondering what you would think about inviting the Kinos here for either a big, country Christmas, or maybe a big country Thanksgiving."

Lizzy gasped and turned toward her husband. "Seriously? I mean, really? Oh, Keegan, that would be so awesome! Oh my goodness, oh, could we? Could we make that happen? How much fun would that be?"

He chuckled. "It would be lots of fun. But, like I said, don't get your hopes up. I'm not sure what they usually do for Christmas. I mean, the Kino family includes a lot of people and Jeffy is about to give birth at the end of November and there are five new little Kinos. It's a big ask. But I can at least ask. Just don't get your hopes up."

"Okay. I won't. You're right, it's a big ask. But maybe the next year."

"We'll see," he said as he softly kissed her lips.

✝✝✝

Genesis 18:19

" For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him."

Chapter Three

Violet ran down the long drive. The large motion sensor lights came on as she neared each one. She could see CJ standing outside the gate in front of his pickup as she neared it. He was on his phone. The gate swung open, which startled her for a brief second, but almost immediately she recognized her father's work.

CJ tucked his phone in his pocket, held his arms open wide and Violet jumped into them.

"Oh CJ," she said softly as he hugged her hard and lifted her from the pavement.

"Violet," he murmured softly before he set her down, lifted her chin and kissed her soundly. He pushed her back, his hands on her shoulders. "Let me look at you."

She smiled up at him. "It's only been two weeks. I didn't change."

"Maybe not. But you are a sight for sore eyes."

"You too." She frowned, touched his cheek. "So, the case you were just on, was it a difficult one?"

His lips pressed together. "It was, complicated. A lot of moving parts. There were twenty agents there to help protect eleven different people as the perps did the crime and the bust went down." He shook his head. "Jay took two bullets. One to the chest and one to the shoulder. We were vested so only the one to the shoulder drew blood. He's gonna be okay. No one else from AMT was injured. One perp died. Two cops were shot, though they were minor wounds. We assisted with the arrest of twenty-three bad guys. All in all, it was a good two weeks' worth of work and I'm happy to be back."

She nodded. She didn't dare say anything about the danger of his work. Her father was his boss. They both were used to the danger and the constant threat. It had been a source of several arguments, but a talk with her mother had helped her to see that this is the work CJ had chosen and Violet could support him, or end the relationship. She chose to support him, just like her own mother supported her father.

Violet brushed her hand over the side of his face. "So, if it all went well, what happened here?"

He shrugged, reaching up to touch the deep scratches on his face. "Got into a little scuffle is all." He smiled. "You should see the other guy."

She frowned at him.

"Okay," he sighed. "A dude jumped out at me from behind a wall in

the courtyard where we were escorting the innocents to get them out of the way. He had a broken piece of concrete in his hand. He got in a few licks before I was able to neutralize him. I'm okay. Really."

"How did you 'neutralize' him?"

He frowned. "You don't need to know that, Violet. Stop."

She sighed. He smiled, then turned and let down the tailgate on his truck, grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up onto the tailgate. Stepping in between her knees, he pulled her close to him. "I'm sorry I woke you and Rose and your father. But I had to come by and see you. And if your father wasn't my boss man, I swear I'd..."

"You'd what?"

"Never mind. So, Vi, I'm off this whole next weekend. Would you like to go with me to the Fall Festival? I promised your sister I would help get a few of the booths set up, and then I'm free the rest of the time."

She smiled up at the handsome agent she was in love with. A little over six feet. Seriously built. Brown hair. Hazel eyes. Perfect features. Gorgeous mouth. Sometimes he was so deadly and serious, and sometimes he reminded her of her brother; casual, happy, friendly, and cute. Really cute. He'd already told both her and her father that he was in love with her, and hinted that he wanted to marry her. But they'd come to a lull in their relationship, because she could not get him to open up to her about his family.

She'd asked her father to give her the information, but he said if CJ didn't want her to know about his past, she should honor that. He also told her it would be unethical for him to give her the information which was another reason for the 'no dating the agents' rule. If Violet were dating any other guy, her father would have no problem sharing the information he found, but because CJ worked for him, he couldn't do it.

Thinking about it, Violet realized that, whatever the problem was, it didn't keep CJ from getting on with Ameritech, and her father didn't forbid their relationship, so how bad could it be? Still, why wouldn't CJ share it with her? Why didn't he trust her?

She brought her mind back to the question and nodded. "I'd love to go to the Festival with you. I promised to help out at the Inn for a few hours. Fall Festival is a big time for the city folk that come in. But then I can be there."

"Meet me at the Gabe Tanner Community Center at noon?"

She smiled. "Sounds perfect."

Leaning forward, he kissed her long and slow. The kiss turned passionate though, and suddenly, he was pushing her onto her back and climbing into the back of the truck beside her. He rolled over onto her and—rts uniform pants and his chest was

They both looked up quickly as the motorized gate began to swing closed and then swing open again.

He pulled up and looked down at her beautiful face. “I think your dad is trying to tell us something.”

She giggled. “He’s never been known to be subtle.”

He pulled her up, led her to the passenger side and put her in the truck. Sighing, he closed the tailgate on his way around to get into the truck.

Violet watched him as he drove up the drive. He had that look again. The serious one. The one that made him look like he had the world on his shoulders. To others it might have seemed like a hardened look. But she knew him. She knew he was hurting. She just didn’t know how to reach him or make him trust her. But she’d figure it out. One way or another.

✞✞✞

October 23rd, Wednesday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jordan’s eyes blinked open when she heard Three’s phone alarm. She turned over to see him head to the bathroom. It’d been a rough night. She’d had to wake Eric up three times from nightmares. At one point, he’d cried and they’d prayed together. He was feeling ashamed, saying he was being weak-minded. She wasn’t sure how to respond to him, but fully intended to talk to Grandmaster Kino and tell him the things Eric said to her. She glanced at the clock. It was five in the morning. When she heard the shower come on, she rose and went to freshen up in her own bathroom.

She went ahead and dressed for school and then straightened up the room she’d occupied. She was leaving, and wasn’t sure when she’d be back. Setting her bag and purse out in the hall, she went back to young Eric’s room.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed and turned to smile at her as she came in. He was wearing martial arts uniform pants and his chest was bare. He stood and held out the gauze pads and tape. “Can you help me?”

“I’ll try.”

He sat down again and watched her as she carefully covered the wounds on his chest. She was biting her lower lip, working slowly to make sure she didn’t hurt him. But the wounds were already a lot better. Finally, she finished and looked up into his eyes with a smile.

“Good morning, Three,” she said softly.

He nodded. “Good morning, Two-Three,” he replied.

She frowned. “So, why are you up so early?”

“It’s beach time. Or will be at six.” He grabbed his white t-shirt off the bed and pulled it over his head.

She shook her head. “But you’re not supposed to be working out until next Monday.”

“I’m not gonna work out. Just stretch, do some Tai Chi, and pray with my family.”

She nodded. “Okay.” She sighed. “Eric, are you upset with me?”

He frowned. “No, of course not. Why would you think that?”

"You seem different. Maybe a little aloof."

He nodded. "I don't feel differently about you, Jordan. I love you, baby. I am feeling a little, I don't know, edgy, I guess. I think I need to work some things out on my own."

She sighed. "Okay, I guess I get that."

"So, Agent Trout will see you home this morning, and stay with you until after your first class. By that time your car will be back at your apartment. Do you remember the code to the key holder?"

She nodded. "Yes. How are you feeling, I mean, physically today?"

"Better. A little more energy. I'm on the mend."

"Good." She wrung her hands together. "When will I see you again?"

"You are coming to the memorial, aren't you?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'll be there."

"I'll see you on Friday then."

She nodded silently. Her chin quivered.

Sighing, he reached out to her and pulled her down to sit next to him, and then immediately pushed her back onto the bed and lay next to her. "Just a few days ago, I thought I might never see you again. I love you, Jordan, with all my heart. I know I seem different. I am in some ways. But my feelings for you haven't changed and I hope yours for me haven't changed. I have a strong urge to show you that I'm not some sniveling, crybaby. I want to show you that I'm still a man, in every sense of the word. I want to take you right now. Forget about everything else, everyone else, about our beliefs, about our goals, I just want to be one with you. But I know that's the darkness trying to get me in my moment of weakness. So, I want to get you out of the danger zone until I can speak with Granddad and get these strange feelings and thoughts out of my brain. Please try to understand."

She put her hand on his gorgeous face. "I understand. Or at least I'm trying to understand. I love you, Three, with all my heart. And I know this experience has changed you because it's changed me. And I may not be able to understand completely, but still, I'm here for you. And I still need you to love me. And I still look up to you, Eric, as the manliest man I've ever known. You have not gone down in my estimation of you. You've gone up. So, babe, you go ahead and deal with what you feel you need to deal with. I'm here for you no matter what. And I'll see you on Friday."

He gazed into her eyes, lowered his head and kissed her a long time. Over and over, until he finally had to pull himself away before he did exactly what he told her he wanted to do. He rose and pulled her up. He started making his bed, and she helped him. Then, they walked out into the hall together, he kissed her once more and headed downstairs. She watched him go, her heart aching to see him suffering emotionally, and hoped Grandmaster Kino would see him today.

She started to gather her bag and purse when Taylor burst from her room. "Oh! Good morning, sis," she said brightly.

Jordan smiled at the endearment. “Hi Taylor.”

Gabe then came out of his room down the hall. “Hey, Jordan! Are you joining us today?”

She shook her head. “No, I think Three needs some time without me,” she said sadly.

Gabe frowned, then smiled kindly at her. “It’ll take a few days to wrap his head around what happened. He’ll come around.”

She looked at the young man. “I guess you would know, huh?”

He grinned. “Yep. Hopefully, you’ll never join the club.” He looked at Taylor. “Come on, Tay, we don’t wanna be late.”

Taylor quickly hugged Jordan. “I’ll see you Friday, right?”

“Yes, I wouldn’t miss it.”

Gabe waved and the two charged down the stairs.

Jordan stood there a few moments, smiling at the sweet energy that pair gave off. She blew out a breath. It was time for her to focus on her own life for a minute. Mr. Kino told her that what she could do for Eric is to take care of her own business. It seemed that he was right. It seemed that Three had told her pretty much the same thing, though, in different words. She’d been taking care of business before she’d met him. Then he stepped in like a knight in shining armor. But now, it was time for her to show her strength again, and take care of her own business. She looked up suddenly when the next to the last door in the hallway opened and Alec stepped out. He saw her and looked down immediately.

Jordan smiled. “Good morning, Alec.”

He nodded. “Hey. So, uh, I didn’t know anyone would still be out here in the hall. Seems these people are early risers.”

Jordan walked toward him. “They are indeed. You wanna see something pretty cool?”

“Sure.”

“Is Desi awake?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Get her.”

He opened the door again. “Des, come here a minute.”

Jordan smiled at her as she came to the door. “Good morning, Desi.”

“Hi, Jordan,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“Come here, I wanna show you something.”

She walked across the hall and opened a bedroom door.

“Whose room is this?” Alec asked.

“No one’s right now,” Jordan said. “I’m just gonna show you guys what this family is doing right now. It’s pretty cool.”

She led them across the room to the balcony door, opened it and they stepped out. She walked to the edge and leaned her arms on the railing. “Look out there,” she said softly.

Alec and Desi looked out toward the ocean and saw on the beach four beautiful people. Three guys, one girl, all moving in tandem.

"Is that like, Tai Chi, right?" Alec asked.

"Well, sort of. Right now, that's the Kino stretch. It's a series of stretches designed by Grandmaster Kino, Ricky Kino's father. When they finish that, they do the Kino form, which is really cool. It's like forms taken from several different styles of martial arts, and then also taken from different levels, like the yellow belt form all the way through the levels to the black belt form, all done in one long form. It takes several minutes. Then they'll do a brutal workout, and then they'll stretch again, and then they'll all kneel in the sand and pray together. It's truly a beautiful thing."

"And they do this every morning?" Desi asked.

"Pretty much. Unless something keeps them from it, like, Eric getting kidnapped."

"Yeah, I guess that would change things up," Alec said softly.

"So, how do you feel, Jordan," Desi asked. "I mean, the story I heard last night, that's something. How do you feel about Eric killing your stepfather?"

She nodded. "I only feel bad that he had to do it because I know it makes him feel bad. I don't feel bad that he's dead. I know that makes me seem like a monster. But really, he was the monster. I mean, he was gonna bury them alive, my boyfriend and my little sister, who was his own daughter. Yes, it was supposed to be just until they collect the ransom money, but, the one guy told Eric that he intended to put him in a place where no one will find him. Peter Perez may have once been a good man, but all I know from him is evil. So, I'm not sad that he's gone. It's between him and God now."

They looked back out at the family.

"That's the Kino form," Jordan said softly.

They watched until it ended.

"You're right, Jordan. That was very cool," Alec said. "I mean, from what I can see of it."

"Oh, that's right. Your glasses got broken. I'm so sorry for what you've been through."

"So, didn't you go to Hillcrest High School too?" Desi asked. "I mean, you just graduated last spring, right? And you live only a few miles from that gas station, but I don't remember you."

"Yes, but I went to North Hillcrest High."

Desi nodded. They stood in silence watching the family on the beach. "So, doesn't Breanna Adams work out with the family?" Desi asked.

"No. She's never been into the martial arts. She does her own workout."

Alec laughed. "It's kinda funny that the wife of *the* Ricky Kino isn't into martial arts."

Jordan nodded. "I said the same thing. But she is who she is, and he is who he is and they are totally in love with each other, and they totally

respect each other. I love their relationship."

The three stayed there on the balcony watching the family work out. When they all went to their knees, they still couldn't pull their eyes from them.

"Well," Jordan said. "My ride is probably waiting on me out front. It was very nice meeting you two. I'm sure I'll see you again."

"Why do you say that?"

She smiled. "Because now that you've stayed here, they'll adopt you into their family. That's just the way they are. They are not gonna patch you up and send you on your way. From here on out, they'll treat you like one of their own."

"I guess we really lucked out," Alec said.

Jordan shook her head. "You didn't luck out. You were blessed."

✝✝✝

...Still Wednesday Morning

As Ricky walked from the beach to the house after their early morning beach session, he pulled out his phone. "Good morning, Joey."

"Hey Rick. So, your instincts were right on. Nick Sutter left his tent last night to go up behind the store and meet with two guys. They tried to hand him a package. The agents couldn't hear what was going down, but it was obvious that Nick was trying to turn them down. They started to rough up Nick, and our guys stepped in. The Hillcrest police showed up. The two dealers and Nick himself ended up getting arrested."

Ricky sighed. "What are Nick's charges?"

"Mark says it's intent to distribute a Schedule I drug, namely, heroin."

"Was he actually in possession of the package?"

"No. He refused to accept it, which is why they were beatin' on him."

"Can we get him off?"

"Maybe. But, it's not his first offense."

"But this time, he was trying to get out of the business."

"Right, and Mark says it just depends on the judge and what mood he's in. But there is some video from the store camera that backs up what he says."

"Okay. Well, can we bail him out, if we put him straight into a medical facility to get him clean?"

"I think that's what Mark is working on right now. You get the facility name and address to him ASAP."

"Got it," Ricky said and hurried into the house.

Bree smiled at him as he came in. "Hey Ricky, whatcha want for breakfast?"

"The usual. I have to go to my study and get some information for Mark. I'll be back in about fifteen minutes."

"Something bad, or something good?"

"Hmm, not sure yet. But the guy Nick, I was telling you I had to go back to Hillcrest and get today? He was arrested last night. So, I have to

call the facility and make arrangements for them to take him and get the info to Mark and we're gonna see if he can be released into the treatment facility."

Fifteen minutes later, Ricky emerged from his study and headed to the kitchen. Bree was just finishing up preparing his three scrambled eggs topped with a mound of cilantro, and a small bowl of blueberries and strawberries.

Ricky kissed his wife. "Good morning, my love," he murmured.

"Morning," she said softly, as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Gabe and Taylor already gone?" Ricky asked.

"Yes, they just left. I tell ya, that Gabe can eat."

Ricky laughed. "He's still a teenager."

Bree frowned. "Ricky."

"Hmm?"

"Let's have a baby."

His brows shot up. "What?"

"You heard me correctly."

"Baby, you're forty-nine years old. Is it even possible?"

She shrugged. "Probably not. But, like, Mom and Eric have five new babies and they were older."

"Are you suggesting we get a surrogate?"

She sighed. "No, not really. I don't feel good about that."

"Me neither, so I'm glad you said that." He sat down at the kitchen table, blessed his food and dug in.

Bree's eyes filled and she sat down with him. "Life goes by so fast, Ricky. My children are almost grown. What is happening?"

He reached up and wiped a tear from her cheek. "Oh, sweetheart, don't be sad. I miss when they were little too." He shrugged. "You know, Eric's probably gonna marry Jordan."

She nodded. "I know and I think that would be wonderful."

"And that means they'll be having children."

Bree sighed. "Eventually."

"And that means you'll have grandbabies."

She nodded. "Yes, eventually, but Jordan is in school. She won't be having babies for a long time."

"Well, for now, let's focus on the present."

"Yeah, let's focus on my breakfast," young Eric said as he came back down the stairs, dressed and ready for the day.

"Did you hear what we were talking about?" Bree asked.

"No. Is it something I need to know?"

She shook her head. "No. It was a private conversation."

"Gotcha." He went to the fridge and started pulling out eggs and fruit and raw milk to use in his smoothie.

"Sweetie, let me do that for you," Bree said.

He turned and put his arm around his mother. "I'm okay, Mom, I

promise I am. It's just that, I'm so grateful that I can move around and feed myself, that I really want to do this myself."

Bree smiled and nodded and hugged him hard.

Ricky finished his breakfast, put his plate in the sink and headed back to his study. "I have details to work out. If you need me for anything, come interrupt me. Or," he said suggestively. "Just come interrupt me anyway."

She giggled. "Go work."

He kissed her and left.

Bree went to the sink.

"You okay, Mom?" young Eric asked.

"I'm fine, sweetie. How about you? How was your night?"

He shrugged. "It was rough, actually."

"In what way?"

"Nightmares."

"Oh honey, I'm sorry. I guess you need to talk to your grandfather."

He nodded. "I know. I will," he said with a sigh.

Bree turned at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. "Good morning, you two!" Bree said cheerfully as Alec and Destiny made their way down the stairs.

Young Eric looked up from putting supplements and fruit in a blender.

Bree looked them over. They looked a little better in their own freshly washed clothes, especially Desi who had several cute outfits. Alec's clothes were older, worn, even a little tattered. As they came toward the bottom of the stairs, Alec misstepped and tumbled down. He jumped up quickly, his face red with embarrassment.

"You okay?" Bree asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm fine. Guess I misjudged the distance."

"Guess so."

"Mom, he needs his glasses. They got broken when he got into a fight at a shelter downtown," Eric said quickly.

"Oh goodness, bless his heart, we'll have to make an appointment right away," Bree said.

Young Eric smiled. Every once in a while, his mom's southern ways slipped out, and when they did, it was totally cute.

"Mrs. Adams, um, we don't have the money right now to get glasses and..."

"It's Kino," Bree corrected with a smile. "The world knows me as Breanna Adams, but my legal last name is Kino."

"Oh, sorry, Mrs. Kino."

"No need to apologize. Now, Mr. Alec Morgan, you were the senior class president at Hillcrest High School last year. Correct? You graduated with honors, were the salutatorian and had achieved an academic scholarship at USC, am I correct?"

He looked down, thinking she was pointing out that someone like that

shouldn't be in his current predicament. "Yes, ma'am."

"So, that means you're smart. Smart enough to completely understand what I'm about to say."

Alec and Desi, eyes wide, both looked at Breanna Adams because of the stern way she was addressing Alec.

"You must realize that money is not an issue here in this household. You probably know the estimated amount we're worth thanks to the tabloids. From here on out, everything we do for you will be taken care of by us. We have absolutely no problem with that. The only thing we have a problem with is you worrying about what little bit of money we're spending on you. We fully intend to get you on your feet. Later, when you're working and supporting your family, if you want to pay it forward to help someone else, then do that. And I highly suggest you do, because being in service to others is what Jesus taught us to do. Anyway, after breakfast, you are going to meet with my husband and he'll go over a plan with you, and you will be fully able to choose what it is you want to do with your life– lives," she added, looking at Destiny.

"There is a laundry list of things to immediately take care of and two of those things are glasses for you, Alec, and an OB appointment for you, Desi. I, we, want you to relax, stop worrying and just breathe. Can you do that?"

Alec nodded. "Yes, ma'am. It's just that, well, I guess I'm feeling ashamed of the situation I find myself in."

She nodded. "Understandable. Listen, sweetie, we all make mistakes. We all make poor decisions. All of us. Including your own parents. And including me. Heck, if I hadn't been so stubborn about marrying my husband, we would have married years earlier and I may have five children instead of only two."

Young Eric's brows lifted at hearing that and he turned and looked at his mother. Was she wishing for more children? Was seeing Desi pregnant or Jeffy pregnant, was it making her want more babies?

"Now," Bree continued. "You two come sit down and tell me what would you like for breakfast?"

"Wow," young Eric said with a chuckle. "Better take advantage of that, cuz that doesn't happen often. She even offered to make my breakfast this morning."

Bree smacked her son on the behind. "Hush."

"I'm just saying," Eric added. "Because like, Mom cooks dinner usually, and Dad helps if he's home, but breakfast is normally a free-for-all. Like, I'm making my usual smoothie, Dad usually has a couple of eggs and some fruit. Taylor has already grabbed an egg sandwich and headed off to school. Gabe cooked himself like, a full-blown meal and left for training. So, really, take advantage of Mom being your short-order cook today, because it probably won't happen again."

"So," Bree began. "What's your favorite thing to have for breakfast,

Desi?"

"Well, I do love French toast," she said.

Alec nodded. "French toast would be heaven right now."

Bree smiled. "Then French toast it is." She turned to young Eric. "You drink your smoothie and go back to bed."

"Mom, I'm awake. I can't sleep all day."

"Well, I insist you try."

"If I do, I won't sleep tonight."

Before she could retort, he switched on the blender, making it impossible to hear for a minute. When it shut off, he emptied the contents into a large insulated cup, rinsed out the blender, left it on a drying pad, kissed his mother on the cheek and smiled at Alec and Desi. "Well, I'm gonna go sit in the hot seat for a few."

"The hot seat?" Alec asked.

He grinned. "The chair right in front of my father's desk. Enjoy your breakfast. You guys are next!"

✝✝✝

Young Eric peeked into his father's office. "You ready for me?"

Ricky waved him in and finished up his phone conversation.

Eric settled down in one of two chairs in front of the desk. His father looked a little stressed as he spoke on the phone. He finally gave a nod. "Yes, sir. We'll be there." He ended the call.

"Was that Granddad?"

"How'd ya know?"

"Well, there's not many people that you say 'yes, sir' to, especially with so much reverence in your voice."

Ricky smiled. "You're very observant. Did you deduce anything else?"

Young Eric shrugged. "You seem a little stressed out."

"You got that one wrong. I'm not stressed. Just in business mode. Gotta take care of business, so, I'm *focused*. But my son is sitting right here in front of me, so that just makes me extremely grateful."

Eric nodded.

"So, son, how are you doing?"

"Uh, I'm okay, I guess."

Ricky shook his head. "That was a bad question. Let me try again. How did you sleep last night?"

Young Eric gave a soft laugh. "Not well. I had nightmares. Jordan had to wake me up. And that's bad because she's afraid to do that."

"Why?"

"She woke me up once, back when I first started training. I was deep asleep. When she woke me I immediately put her into a choke hold. It scared her."

"I bet."

Eric sighed heavily. "I asked her to go back to her life."

Ricky's brows rose. "Expand on that please."

"I don't want her to sleep with me. It's too dangerous. And also, it's too embarrassing."

"Let's tackle the embarrassing part first. Why are you embarrassed?"

"She woke me up from nightmares. A few times, I was crying like some freakin' kid scared of the dark. Which I guess I am."

"Keep going. You were crying."

"Yes, and I don't want her to see that. I don't want her to see me so weak and vulnerable. The girl I marry needs to see that I'm strong, that I can protect her, that I won't fold when things get tough, and the side of me I presented to her last night was weak and ugly and I can't stand it. It's totally embarrassing to have her try to comfort me and wipe away the tears on my face like she's my mother or something."

"When she does that, what side of herself is she showing?"

He thought. "I guess a nurturing side."

Ricky nodded. "Yes. She's showing a side you want the woman you marry to have, because she is gonna need to nurture your children. Women, most women, are nurturers. Their maternal instincts kick in. I spoke with Jordan yesterday before she joined you when you napped before dinner. She's worried about you. She hates to see you suffer and she wants to help. This is why she tries to hold you and wipe away your tears. She wants you to know that she loves you, no matter what.

"She doesn't see you as weak. She sees you as injured. If someone is injured in a car accident, let's say they break their leg, do you think of them as weak? Do you look down on them because they're in pain, and because it's gonna take them a while to get back on their feet?"

"No, sir."

"Even if that person sheds some tears because of the pain, you realize that's the body's defense mechanism, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Jordan is not dumb. She's a brilliant young lady and she doesn't see you as weak. Or as a crybaby. She understands that you are injured. Not in a physical way, but in a much harder way. Because a cut on your face heals and fades. A cut in your mind, in your psyche, will always be there. You have to stop the hemorrhaging and let it heal, but the scar will always be there. It takes a while before the hemorrhaging stops. Your nightmares are the hemorrhaging. They'll stop. Jordan wanted to help because she loves you. You're thinking, the man she marries has to show strength, and she's thinking the woman you marry has to show that she can handle taking care of a strong man. She hurts, Eric, because you hurt."

"I don't want her to hurt."

"You can't stop how others feel, but you CAN allow her to be what she instinctively wants to be."

"I told her this morning that I love her but I need her to focus on her own life. Go to softball practice. Go to her classes. Take care of business."

"You told her to focus on the present, on the business at hand, and that's actually not a bad thing. If people can learn to do that, even during difficult times, it helps them survive. But there is a fine line here, son. Don't push her away. You understand?"

Eric nodded.

"Now, there was something else you said a bit ago when you mentioned it was too embarrassing. You said it was too dangerous. Did you mean because she wakes you from your nightmares?"

"Maybe."

"What else?"

He sighed. "Because of how I cried, it made me feel, like, well, like not very masculine."

Ricky nodded. "Got it. Breaking down and crying can seem emasculating. And it would be if you did it all the time. But, you have to understand Eric, that what you went through was extraordinary and it's okay to be shaken up by that and to shed some tears. Being taken, being held against your will, being restrained, being beaten while restrained, and having the threat that you will soon be put into a small box and buried in the ground with no idea if anyone will ever find you, and then having to fight for your life, and having to actually kill people, to take their lives, to push that knife into Perez' chest and feel it go into his heart..."

"Dad! Stop!"

Ricky nodded. "I'm just lancing the wound." He rose and went to sit in the chair next to his son, who now had the dreaded tears running down his face. Ricky reached out and placed his hand on his son's shoulder and looked into his eyes. "This will pass, Eric. I promise. And your crying is not unmasculine. It's needed. It's cathartic. But I still don't understand, why is it dangerous?"

"Because it makes me want to show Jordan that I'm still a man. That I may have cried, but I'm still masculine, and that makes me want to make love to her. It's almost too strong to resist. And so, I don't want her to stay with me. It's too hard and I don't have control. At least not currently."

Ricky nodded. "Okay. That makes sense. AND that actually shows great strength, because you are doing what has to be done to protect her virtue and to live by your principles."

Eric sat in silence. He felt drained.

Ricky sighed. "Well, Dad wants to see you today. He wants me to come with you to the studio and I'll take over Gabe's training for the rest of the day and he wants to have a session with you and then he wants to travel down to Hillcrest and have a session with Josie when she gets out of school."

Young Eric only nodded. "When are we leaving?"

"I have to speak with Alec and Desi first and that will take at least an hour. So, we'll leave around eleven. Until then, go upstairs and rest."

"Yes, sir," he said sullenly as he started to rise from the chair.

"But first, let's pray," Ricky offered.

✝✝✝

Jordan's practice was rough. The coach pulled her aside for a short talk and Jordan assured her that things would go back to normal. The man who had drugged her and was trying to hurt her was now dead. Eric was back and recovering quickly. She assured her coach that she was gonna get back on track and into the swing of things.

She'd walked off the field and Agent Trout smiled at her. "It'll get better now that all the drama is over," he assured.

She sighed. "Three wanted me to go take care of my own business. Apparently, I'm not doing that very well. I can't afford to lose my scholarship."

Colton came up behind her and hooked an arm around her neck. "Give yourself a break, Jordan. Come on, let's go change."

"I'll be here until after your first class," Agent Trout said. "Your car should be here by then and I'll take you to it. After that, you're on your own cuz I have another assignment."

She saluted. "Yes, sir."

He smiled.

A few minutes later she emerged from the locker rooms and Agent Trout gave Jordan a ride to Kaplan Hall, and walked her into her English class.

✝✝✝

1 Timothy 1:5

"I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that
dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your
mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well."

Chapter Four

Alec and Desi took their place in the two chairs sitting in front of Ricky Kino's desk. The hot seat, as Eric had called it. Ricky smiled at them kindly.

"Good morning, guys," Ricky said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," Desi answered quickly. "It was the best night's sleep I've had in over four months."

Ricky nodded. "Good. So, I wanted to meet with you to find out what your goals are, what you want to accomplish in your lives, and make a plan of action. So, tell me, Alec, you first, what are your short-term and long-term goals?"

Alec sighed. "Well, um, Mrs. Kino says my very first goal should be to get some glasses."

"You wear glasses?"

"Yes, sir. My glasses broke, so, I'm having trouble seeing."

"My wife is correct. We'll take care of that today. Or actually, *she* will. If I know her, she's probably already made an appointment. Okay, now let's move on," Ricky said. "Goals."

"Okay, well, after glasses, we need to find a place to live. We need to make sure Desi is okay, I mean, with the baby and all because she hasn't been to a doctor. I need to find a job. I'd like to eventually get into college."

"You had a scholarship to USC, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"What had you intended to study?"

"Eventually law. After I get my bachelor's, I want to go to law school, maybe, hopefully at Stanford. But I've probably lost the scholarship and have definitely lost my internship with Jenkins and Savage who are like, the tenth-ranked law firm in California. I messed up."

Ricky nodded. "Go ahead, Alec, and tell me exactly how you messed up, tell me how it all happened."

He gave a short laugh. "Well, I met Desi a year ago. Last fall. Meeting her, it like, blew me away. She was a junior. I was a senior at Hillcrest High. I'd seen her around, but never spoken to her, until one day in the lunchroom. After that, I couldn't get her out of my mind. I had everything going for me. I knew I was gonna be valedictorian. I had landed an internship, I had a full-tuition academic scholarship. I had my life planned. But once I met her, it was like, I don't know, like I lost my mind.

I couldn't think about anything else. My grades started to slip at first, but I got back on track when my mother threw a huge fit. I lost the bid for valedictorian, but achieved salutatorian.

"Things would've been okay, but then there was prom, and we went and a friend had procured a room at the hotel and we found ourselves up there. There was alcohol involved, and teenage hormones, and we had sex and she got pregnant. That's how I messed up. Because my intentions were to go to law school, get a good job, make a lot of money, ask Desi to marry me after she graduated from high school and live happily ever after. But when she got pregnant her dad threw her out of the house."

Ricky shook his head. "Desi, did he give you a reason?"

"Well, he said it was because I blatantly disobeyed him and if I can't follow his rules then I have to leave. I told him I was sorry. I know saying 'sorry' doesn't fix it. He was so mad. At one point, I thought he was gonna hit me. I think I embarrassed him. Here we were, this prominent family in the community, in our church, fairly well-to-do, and his daughter gets pregnant as a junior in high school. I mean, I know it was wrong. The whole thing seems like a blur to me. Alec keeps saying he messed up, but it takes two, ya know? I'm just as much to blame."

"I'm the guy and I'm older and I should've been more responsible," Alec said quickly. "Anyway, my mom went freakin' crazy. She didn't want me to throw away my future, but she also didn't want to help me with Desi. She said I needed to forget about her and go to school and make something of myself. But, Mr. Kino, please understand, she was homeless. She had nowhere to go. She went to stay with a friend at first, but her parents said she couldn't stay there long, just a few weeks. I couldn't just leave her and go off to school."

Ricky nodded. "I understand. I'm glad you felt that way."

"You are?"

"Yes, of course. You were willing to take responsibility for your actions. It would've been nice if the parents had stepped in with love and compassion rather than condemnation, but they may have thought they were giving you tough love and it backfired. Whatever it was, forgive them. We all make mistakes. Us parents too."

Alec blinked as he considered what the man just said. Alec and Desi had been begging their parents for forgiveness, but they also needed to forgive their parents. He hadn't thought about that.

Ricky smiled. "I know I just threw you for a loop, but let's get back to your goals. Alec, do you still want to go to school and study law?"

"Yes, sir, but I think I've blown my chances."

"Sometimes when God closes a door, He opens a window. I'm fairly certain I can speak to my friends that are on the board at USC and get them to reinstate your scholarship."

Alec's eyes opened wide in surprise.

Desi gasped. "Really?"

"Yes, really. But I cannot get you the internship back at Jenkins and Savage. However, I can get you one at Lee and Adams, providing you keep your grades up at college."

"Lee and Adams, I mean, that is the number two law firm in the state of California! How can you do that?"

"Well, Justin Lee is my father's best friend, and has been since he was a teenager, and Mark Adams is my stepbrother, whom I trained in the martial arts, so I'm his Master, and he'll freakin' do what I say."

Alec glanced at Desi.

Ricky laughed. "I'm just kidding around. Though he really is my brother, and, well he really will do whatever I ask him to do."

"This is amazing. So, if I can just find a job and a place to live, then we could make it. I'll work extra hard."

"I believe you. The housing situation is being taken care of as we speak. I expect Angel to call me back any minute with news on when you can move in. It may be a few weeks. We'll see what she says. I know that it will be a small home, near USC. Possibly within walking distance, definitely within biking distance of the school."

"Who is Angel?"

"She is my stepmother's best friend. She runs a national organization to help women. Abuse hotlines, homes for those escaping domestic violence. Centers for women and children, help for teen pregnancy and pro-life centers, that help battle the evil of abortion and help women who've ended up in your exact predicament make a more godly choice. You've probably heard of Angel's work, *The Angel Network for Women*."

"Oh, I have heard of that," Desi said. "I thought they helped domestic violence victims. I didn't know I could have turned to them in my situation."

"You could have, and she'll be glad to learn that you didn't know that so that she can fix that campaign. Angel Lee is a force to be reckoned with and I'm proud to know her."

"Angel Lee?" Alec asked. "So, is she related to Justin Lee?"

"She is. She's his sister-in-law. She's married to his brother, Jason Lee who is the founder and owner of Ameritech Security."

"Oh wow. These are some powerful people."

"Yes, they are. We are a family, and we all work together to do God's will. To fight His battles. We are His warriors. And I have a feeling you are being called to be the same. God knows His own, and His own know His voice. But I digress. The house will be furnished. Bree will take you shopping for whatever you need, be it pots and pans, or linens, or whatever you'll need for the baby. She might be able to just gather you around the computer and shop online. She will also get you clothes or shoes, to make sure you're good to go."

"Mrs. Kino told us to just accept that you intend to spend some money on us, and for me to simply pay it forward, but it feels so strange to have

you do this."

Ricky shook his head. "Listen to me, Alec. The money we spend on you is no big deal. We are blessed. With our blessings comes a big responsibility. That responsibility is to do God's work. Whatever He places in front of us is what we work on. He placed you two in front of us. So, my wife is correct. Pay it forward, and not necessarily in money, but in kindness."

Alec nodded. "Then, if you guys are gonna take care of all of that, all I need to do is find a job to work around my schooling."

Ricky nodded. "May I suggest something?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"I'm told the baby is probably due in late January."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, if you start school after Christmas break, the baby will be coming at that same time and you might not be able to concentrate, and when you're a freshman, you have to really put in the time. So, I would like to suggest that you wait until next fall. It just puts you one year behind from where you would have been. That will give you time to enjoy your new family member, get everything situated and get focused."

"So, you're saying I could work full time until next fall and get some money ahead for when I have to cut down on work hours. That makes a lot of sense."

"Right. And as far as finding a job. I think it would be best for you to work as an assistant or legal aide at the law firm where you will intern."

Ricky turned when his phone rang. "Hello, Angel, I have you on speaker with Alec and Desi."

"Oh, wonderful! Well, hey there, Alec and Desi!"

"Hello, hi," the kids replied.

"Ricky, let me video call you, and put me up on the screen."

The call went dead and a second later the phone buzzed. Ricky put it up on the screen to their right. Alec had to turn his chair. They looked up at a beautiful blonde with a wide smile.

"Now I can say, it's very nice to meet y'all," Angel said.

Ricky smiled. "She's a southerner, in case you didn't catch the accent."

"Oh now you hush, Ricky. Listen kids, I'm working very hard to get you into a home I have near USC. I may have to wait until spring, because the only house I have right now is occupied, but the young man is graduating this spring and they have plans to move back to Montana. Now, I know this might be disappointing that you have to wait for the house, but I can probably find a decent apartment until then, or if you would rather stick around this area until spring, I have a cute little house in Santa Ana that needs some loving care. What are your thoughts about that?"

"Interesting, Angel," Ricky said. "We were just discussing the

possibility of them waiting until next fall to start back to school. So, if they stick around here Alec can work at Lee and Adams until next spring, and then we can move them in up near USC."

"Really! Oh, isn't God just so amazing. When we're doing His will things just fall into place."

"Yes they do," Ricky agreed.

"So, Alec, Desi, what do y'all think about moving into a house in Santa Ana, which is not very far from LA?"

"I think it would be a dream come true," Desi said.

"Oh, no," Angel jumped in. "The dream come true will be when that baby is born. But also when Bree and I finish helping you get all set up. This is gonna be so much fun!"

Desi giggled. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Lee."

"Oh, honey, call me Angel."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Angel, when will the house be ready to move them in?"

"Anytime they want. It's vacant and it's been cleaned. But they need to come look at it, because they might want to change some paint colors."

"You're just hoping Bree will get it renovated for you so you don't have to."

Angel laughed. "And I thought Shelley was the only one who could see right through me."

"Shoot us the address," Ricky said. "And Bree will take the kids over and look at it."

"Will do. Listen, y'all, I've gotta go. I have a call waiting. Love ya, Ricky. Bye Desi and Alec. Hope to see you in person soon!"

"Bye, Angel," the kids said softly.

The screen went blank. Ricky turned and smiled at the kids. "She's definitely had her morning coffee."

"She's something," Alec said.

Ricky nodded. "Okay, so it sounds like we've got a rough plan. And Bree will handle the rest of the details."

"Thank you, sir," Alec said.

"Just one more thing," Ricky said. "If you could have three magical wishes right now, each of you, what would they be? Desi, you go first."

"Um, what do you mean by magical?"

"I mean, don't think about how impossible they may seem. Just name three things that you would dearly love to have."

Desi nodded, chewed on her lip. "I'd like to have my family back. My dad and mom and sister. I wish they could accept Alec and forgive me and be a part of this baby's life with us."

Ricky smiled. "That is a beautiful wish. What's number two?"

"Well, I wish Alec could have the same thing with his mom."

"And the third?"

"I wish I could graduate from high school."

"Three very mature wishes," Ricky said. "We'll see what we can do." He looked at Alec. "And you?"

"You've already given me everything I could ask for."

"Humor me," Ricky said.

Alec drew a deep breath and blew it out. "Okay, then, well, I wish I had some transportation. Ya know, to get Desi to doctor appointments, and to the hospital when the time comes, or just for me to get to work from Santa Ana to Los Angeles."

Ricky smiled. "Good choice, and it was honest and it was difficult to say it because you were worried I would see it as superficial. But no, I see it as you thinking like a man, working out in your mind how you're going to make things work and get things done. Transportation is a must. Good job. What else?"

"Okay, well, I wish that our baby will be healthy with no problems through labor and delivery and we'll come home with a healthy, happy child."

"Another good one," Ricky said. "We'll make sure Desi gets the best prenatal care and the best nutrition from here on out. The rest of that is in God's hands. Okay, one more. Make it the best one."

Alec glanced over at Desi. "I, uh, I guess I wish Desi and I could be married."

He smiled at her and she smiled back.

Ricky suppressed his smile. "Well, have you proposed to her?"

"Actually, no, I haven't. But, I mean, we've discussed it."

"Why do you want to marry her?"

"Because I love her."

"Not because she carries your child?"

"Well, that too. I love her. And I'll love the baby. But I don't love her because she's pregnant. I loved her before we got pregnant."

Ricky smiled. "Well said. That's what I was looking for. You see, marriage is the biggest decision you make in life. Not your career path, not whether to buy a house, but marriage. It's what life is all about. But, Alec, you two are very young. And sometimes when you marry young, you don't realize that you as a person are going to change, which means your feelings may change."

"They won't," Desi said.

Ricky nodded. "I know you believe that. Taylor keeps telling me that her feelings for Gabe won't change. And they are the same ages as you guys, and they too have talked about marriage."

"And you don't want them to get married?" Alec asked.

"Oh, I would LOVE them to get married. It's like they were made for each other. But they're young and I've asked Gabe to wait on her to grow up a little."

Alec nodded. "So you're saying we should wait?"

"No. You may be the same age, but your circumstances are completely

different. You've put the cart before the horse, and I'm not saying that to shame you, just stating facts. I just don't want you to get married because you feel you have to and then ten years down the road end up hating each other. I want you to marry and have it last forever. Did you know that a very large percentage of marriages in the United States eventually end in divorce?"

"No," they both answered.

"That means that many of those people who stand before their friends and families and pastors and justices and other officiators who vow to love, honor, and cherish, etcetera, break their vows. Vows are not to be broken, but people don't really take them seriously, and they break them. And then they fight over custody of the children. And they fight over property. And it gets very ugly. It has nothing to do with love at that point. It's very sad.

"So, if you were to get married, I would want to see it last forever. For your sakes and for the sake of your child. People say that the main reason for marriages breaking up is over pressures to do with finances and that may have been the main reason for a while. But actually now, if you research it, the main reason is the lack of commitment, which translates to infidelity, and lack of communication skills, which translates to arguing and fighting, but even those are not the real reason."

"So then, what is the reason?" Alec asked.

"They don't have their priorities straight."

"Priorities? You mean, like family first?"

"Well, that's the idea, and though 'families first' seems like the right thing, it's still not the best thing to put first. The best thing is to put God first. You see, kids, God is real, and He gave us rules to follow and He gave us those rules not to make things hard for us, but to make things better for us including making marriages happy and joyful and lasting. Your current predicament is evidence of what I'm saying. If God is first, we won't break the vows we made in front of Him. We won't think it's okay to have an affair. We won't be tempted to treat our spouse badly. We will be kind and supportive and cleave unto each other. If we put God first, that means we are always striving to do His will, which means we are always striving to do the right thing, which means you can trust each other and rely on each other because you know your significant other is praying and listening to God's promptings." He smiled at them. "I know this is a lot, but are you following?"

"I think so. But it seems, like, a little fanatical."

Ricky chuckled. "I know, right? But that's because you haven't really connected to God yet. Do you believe in God?"

"I do," Desi said. "But Alec and I have never talked about that kind of thing."

"Well, I'm not gonna push it on you guys right now. Actually, I'm not gonna push it on you ever. But especially not right now, because when

God calls you, I want it to be between you and Him. And I don't want it to be that you listen to me talk about my faith because we're helping you. What we're doing for you is not conditional. You don't have to be a Christian. I *will* give you just a little advice, if and when you get married, take your vows very seriously. No matter how tempting it is, don't cheat on each other. Trust each other. Don't lie to each other. Talk to each other. My father always says, 'communication is the key.' And Desi, don't think that it's a bad thing to want to stay home and take care of your baby and your husband while he's trying to make something of himself so that he can give you a good home. It's a marvelous thing. What women do, give birth, nurture their families, be so loving and work so hard when they're so tired, well, they are simply amazing."

He smiled. "Those words come easy because I tell my wife that on a regular basis. She's a renowned actress but she's humble and down to earth and loves to serve our family. She gave a sermon a few weeks ago, in Nashville. It's on the church website and on YouTube and has been shared hundreds of thousands of times. You should watch it."

"Hmm, that's something we didn't think about, Mr. Kino. We have our phones, but we have no cell service."

"Oh, good catch. We'll add that to Bree's list." He tapped his desk and smiled. "Well, I'm done counseling. You guys have a big day ahead. You're gonna go look at your next home. Gonna go get some glasses. Gonna go shopping. I'll see you at dinner tonight." He smiled. "Normally, I would pray with you before I send you off into the world, but I don't want to shove my faith down your throats, so I guess, you guys have a great day."

"Um, Mr. Kino," Alec said. "I would be honored to have you pray with us. I mean, though I have a lot to learn, I'm a pretty smart guy. And I'm smart enough to see that whatever you have going for you in your life, it's good. You guys all have a, well, a strength I guess, or a power, like I've never felt before. And I'm thinking that must be your faith in a higher power. And I'm interested. And I don't feel pressured because you're helping us. How could I not sit up and take notice? So, please, don't send us off into the world without your prayer."

Ricky felt the Spirit move through him and his eyes immediately moistened. He nodded. "When you get your degree and pass the bar, I have a feeling you're gonna be one heck of an attorney. Let's pray. Bow your heads."

"Father, Alec, Desi and I come before you at this time to ask your blessing on these two kids. Thank You, Father, for helping them, thank You for putting them in our path and thank You that young Eric was following the Holy Spirit when he stopped to talk to Nick Sutter on the side of that store. We love the way You work, the way things fall into place. Father, I realize that You have something special in store for these kids, and I'm gonna guess for their little one too, and I pray you will send

Your Holy Spirit to touch their hearts and minds and help them to know Your will for their lives.

"Father, please be with them and with my wife as they go about today, protect them, keep them safe from all the dark forces of this world. Help everything to work out for the best today as they try to get their lives cleaned up and in order. And, Father, please bless their little baby, and help it to be strong and healthy. That's all for now, no, oh wait, Father, we ask that you touch the hearts of their parents and help them to remember compassion and forgiveness. We ask these things, in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, amen."

Alec and Desi blinked, stood, smiled at each other. Ricky came around the desk and put his strong arms around them both. "You guys have a great day."

"Thank you," Alec said. "I have a feeling it's gonna be the best day ever."

✝✝✝

October 23rd, Wednesday Morning
UCLA, Los Angeles, California

At 10:35 Jordan walked out of her class. Together she and Agent Trout left the building and headed to his car. He opened the door for her and drove her to her apartment building. She immediately spotted her car in the back parking lot.

Jordan smiled. "Wow, it's all shiny and new looking."

"Yeah, it's amazing what a coat of wax can do," Trout said.

Jordan giggled. She looked up at the man who'd been in charge of protecting her life for the past month or so. He was handsome. She knew he was twenty-nine years old because she'd already asked him when Jackie requested the information a long time ago. He wasn't just good-looking, but was very kind— and very lethal.

"Well, I guess this is it," Jordan said.

"You be careful now."

Frowning, she sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing really. I guess I just feel strange. I got used to having you around. Now, I'm gonna feel vulnerable because you're not here by my side."

He smiled and nodded. "That's normal. It's a thing our clients talk about. It's actually a bit of separation anxiety. You have my number. Call me if you need me for anything. If I can't be here, I can find someone real quick who can. But you have young Eric, so you're good."

"I guess I do."

"Whaddya mean, you guess? Did you two break up?"

"No. At least I don't think we did. But he wants me to take care of my own business, focus on myself for a while."

Agent Trout smiled kindly. "Listen, Jordan, when someone goes

through what young Eric did, they sometimes struggle to find themselves. He has to come to terms with what happened. He may need you to focus on yourself because he's unable to do it right now. Give him some time. He'll come around."

"That's the same thing Gabe said."

Trout nodded. "Well, Gabe would know."

Jordan nodded and smiled up at the man. "Do you know?"

He frowned. "If you're asking if I've had to kill a man, the answer is, you don't ask people that. I'll answer you by telling you that I was in the military for four years."

She grimaced. "Oh. I'm sorry for being nosy."

"It's okay, I'm just telling you that because I like you. You remind me of my kid sister."

Jordan smiled. "Hey, that reminds me, I meant to ask you, how did your 'appointment' go the other day."

He smiled. "It was nice."

"So, where did you meet her?"

"Here. Outside your classroom."

"Oh! Do I know her?"

"Yes."

"You're dating a UCLA student?"

"No."

"Oh! A teacher?"

He nodded. "Your English professor."

"Oh wow!" Jordan nodded. "She's cute, and she's cool."

"I'm so glad you approve."

Jordan laughed. "Well, Agent Bentley Trout, I just wanna say thanks for taking care of me. I'm gonna miss you."

He smiled. "Watching over you has been my pleasure. You're a good girl, Jordan. Eric is a lucky guy."

She smiled, moved forward, put her arms around his neck, hugged him and then kissed his cheek. He patted her back, then took her by the waist and set her away. "Remember, you can call me if you need to."

She nodded. "I will."

"So, go ahead and get your keys out of the key holder so I can make sure you can get into your car."

She turned and did it immediately.

"Okay, good job," he said as he got in his car, waved again, and pulled away.

His phone buzzed. "Accept." And then, "Hello, Deputy Chief Adams."

"What's your ETA?"

"Thirty minutes."

"You're running a little late."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I was having trouble cutting the umbilical cord."

"I understand. I'll inform the client."

Jordan watched him pull off, having an empty feeling for the second time today. Feeling very much alone, she walked toward her apartment. She had some homework to do before her next class.

She turned abruptly when she heard someone behind her. A girl smiled at her, as she held her phone out in front of her and started talking to someone.

"Yeah, hey, I just wanted to say that I'm gonna be late," the girl said. She passed Jordan and went around the front of the building. Jordan shook her head. The girl startled her. She was being paranoid. Peter was dead. Focus on my life, she thought, as Eric's words came back to her.

Jordan went inside and looked around. She hadn't been here in several days. The place was a mess. She put her books down on the sofa and immediately started cleaning up. Shoes, clothes, dirty dishes were all over the place. Something sour was in a pan on the stove and she wondered how long it had been there. She gathered all the dishes and cleaned the kitchen. She put in a load of towels to wash and gathered the rest of the clothes into their owner's laundry baskets. She made beds and straightened rooms. Then she scrubbed the toilet, wiped the makeup off the bathroom counter, lined up the brushes and combs and hair dryers and straighteners and scrubbed the shower.

Finally feeling like she could relax, she gathered her stuff off the couch and went to her room to sit on her bed and study. She was alone for the first time in a long time. It was so quiet. She rubbed her hands over her arms. Her mind went to sweet Josie and how she must have felt when she was in that room inside the mine all alone, and how relieved she must have felt to see Three open that door. Three. Eric. Eric Kino, III. He's struggling. And she hated that. He's so kind. He's like, goodness personified. She wanted to help him, to be there for him, but he'd sent her away.

She guessed what he was going through was way above her pay grade. She had no knowledge of killing, and what that does to someone. He said he felt he needed to prove his manhood, or something like that. She shook her head. She didn't understand at all.

She cracked open her book and began to read about Europe in the twentieth century. Which to her, was a class that turned out to be as boring as it sounded.

✝✝✝

Jordan awoke with a start. She'd drifted off to sleep. Glancing at her phone, she realized she'd slept almost an hour and she needed to get going or she'd be late. She gathered up her books and notebooks, grabbed her purse, and started out, but suddenly remembered the towels in the wash. Quickly, she dropped her stuff, put the towels in the dryer on the longest cycle, grabbed up her things and ran out of the apartment.

She got in her car and dumped everything over on the passenger seat. The car started right up. She sniffed. It smelled really good, which made

her smile. She flew across campus to Bundt Hall, found a parking space and leaned over to gather everything that she'd tossed onto the passenger seat. She was pulling her head out of the car when she dropped the book with all of her notes in it and papers scattered.

Shoving her keys into her purse, she set it on the pavement at her feet, and began gathering all the papers and notes and stuffing them into her book. She finally had everything in her arms, grabbed up her purse, locked the car and took off up the sidewalk toward the history building, thinking this day was just gonna be one of those days.

She sighed and looked up to see a guy running toward her full speed. Her heart began to race. She tried to step off the sidewalk but he was on her too fast. His shoulder bumped her as he ran by causing her to drop all of her stuff again. He turned. "Oh, wow, I'm sorry, but I'm late, I gotta go."

Jordan watched him disappear down the hill to the parking lot. Muttering, she began gathering her stuff again. "Oh, you're late. Well, so am I, you idiot," she mumbled. She quickly ran to stomp on a paper that was trying to blow away. She picked it up, and turned to finish gathering her stuff.

"Here ya go."

Jordan looked up. A guy was smiling at her, holding out her history book to her. "Oh, uh, thank you," she said quickly as she took the book from his hand and gathered more papers to stuff back into the book. He helped her. Finally, he picked up her purse and held it out to her. She accepted it and pulled the strap over her shoulder.

"That should do it," he said, looking around to make sure they didn't miss any more loose papers.

"Thank you very much," she said quickly. "I have to go. I'm late." She turned to leave.

He smiled and nodded. "My name is Mason Cole," he called after her as she ran away.

She threw up her hand and waved.

✝✝✝

October 23rd, Wednesday 2:00 PM

Kino Martial Arts, Newport Beach, California

Young Eric and his grandfather emerged from their counseling session. Young Eric had received some clarity after first counseling with his father earlier and then having his grandfather echo some of the things his father had said. He then added his vast experience and knowledge to the mix, reminding him that Navy SEALs and other special forces experience post-traumatic stress, and cry over what they've seen and what they've done. Does young Eric think of them as less masculine?

He also asked Eric to give him a very specific and detailed accounting of the man whose throat he'd slit. Young Eric worked his way through the telling with tears and tremors, but felt better for it. He now felt much

calmer and stronger. After telling his grandfather his real thoughts as he was doing what he did, he realized he thought the man would truly kill him if young Eric didn't take him out. And the man was too big for young Eric to subdue in his weakened state. Eric truly did what he had to do to survive.

Ricky looked up from teaching Gabe when his father and son approached. "Hello, guys. Everything okay?"

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, sir. Better anyway."

"Good."

"I'm gonna head out," Eric Sr. said. "Mrs. Perez has given me permission to pick up her children from school. I'm gonna feed them and counsel them. And they have a class with Master Cook this evening so I'm going to stay and visit the class."

Young Eric smiled. "Are you gonna let Master Cook know that you're coming?"

Eric senior smiled. "No, I am not."

Ricky smiled. "Don't worry son, he'll be okay."

Young Eric nodded. "I wasn't worried. Just curious. After all, one day, I'll be the one dropping in on different schools, right?"

Ricky's eyebrows rose. "Yes of course, if that's where your interest lies. I didn't realize you were thinking along those lines."

"Well, I didn't realize that either, until just now. I mean, there is a legacy to keep. What granddad has created, this remarkable entity known as Kino Martial Arts, it's a legacy that I honor and respect and want to make sure it continues. And, I was named Eric Kino after you, Granddad, right?"

Eric senior smiled. "You were. And both your father and I would be ecstatic to know that you intend to keep the legacy alive. And we'll be happy to show you the ropes. Still, don't discard other things you have going for you in your life right now."

"Other things?"

"Yes, other things, like, you're about to hit superstardom once you win the Challenge and your movie goes blockbuster."

Young Eric nodded. "If. Let's just see what happens."

Ricky's eyes met his father's. Young Eric had turned a corner and five days ago had sparred extremely well against other masters and even against his Uncle Joey. They hoped he hadn't fallen too far back, because they only had about nine days to train before the big event.

They all turned to see Master Foreman coming toward them with a huge smile on his face. He shook Ricky's hand. "Good to see you, Grandmaster Kino," he said respectfully. "Sorry I didn't get to greet you when you and young Eric first got here. The women's self-defense class is getting huge and I had to add another session."

"No problem," Ricky said. "I watched a little of the class through the window and you're doing a great job with those ladies."

Master Foreman nodded. "I'm learning patience." He turned and smiled at young Eric and then wrapped him in a giant hug. "And here's the man of the hour. I cannot express how happy I am to see you standing here." He let go of the young man and backed away, then bowed. "Master Kino, well done. We all prayed for you, and worried about you, and were so very happy to hear that you survived and also that you were able to save Jordan's little sister."

Young Eric smiled and returned the bow. "Thank you, sir."

"Well Master Foreman," Eric senior began. "Ricky is staying and I'm leaving to go take care of some business."

Master Foreman bowed to him. "It's always an honor to see you, Grandmaster Kino."

"You as well," Eric senior responded as he bowed. He looked at young Eric. "You go home and rest your tired brain."

Young Eric sighed. "Yes, sir."

✝✝✝

"Call Grandma," young Eric said.

She picked up on the fifth ring. "Hey my sweet boy," Shelley said. "How are you feeling, honey?"

"Hey Grandma," young Eric said. "I'm better. I was just thinking about you and the kiddos and I know Granddad won't be home until after dinner tonight and I was thinking maybe I could stop by and see you and the kids. I'm supposed to be going home to rest, but no one is home at my house and it's kinda lonely and I thought I could just make this one little stop."

"You know you're welcome here anytime. And you can just sleep here if you'd like and go home later for dinner."

"I'd like that. Thanks, Grandma."

"Oh, sweetie, you don't have to thank me. You know I love you to be here. Besides, don't tell anyone but you're my favorite."

Young Eric chuckled. "Grandma, I know that JoJo is your favorite."

"How could you say that? Who told you that?"

"JoJo."

"Well, of course he did," she said with a laugh. "You don't pay him any attention. Now come on home, sweetie, see the kids and then go straight to bed."

"Okay, on my way." He hung up and spoke again. "Call Jordan."

The phone rang five times and went to message. He sighed and hung up. "Text Jordan," he said.

"What would you like to say?"

"Hey, Two-Three. Just thinking about you and missing you. How was your day? I guess you're in class. Call me when you get a chance. I love you."

"Are you ready to send it?"

"Yes."

Fifteen minutes later, young Eric drove up to his grandparents' house and headed in the front door.

"Grandma?" he called.

"In the kitchen having our afternoon snack," Shelley replied.

Eric smiled when he heard, "Uh, uh, uh, you stay right there, Nate, Angelina, he'll come in here."

Young Eric walked back to the kitchen. "Well, hey there, little guys and girl! Whatcha doin'?"

"Eatin' a snack," Noah answered.

"Hmm, looks good, can I have some?" he said as he sat at an empty chair.

"Yes, here," Nate said quickly.

"Have some uh mine too," Angelina said.

Suddenly all of the children were handing Eric one of their peanut butter crackers and a few of their grapes.

"Wow, now I have the most," he said with a laugh.

"Dat's okay," Abraham said. "You are da biggest."

"Well, keep eating good healthy food and one day you might even be bigger than me."

His comment was rewarded with smiles.

Shelley came up behind him and hooked her arms around him. "My baby boy," she said softly. "I was sick, really sick with worry. I might just hold on and never let you go."

He patted her arm where it rested on his chest. "That would be fine with me, Grandma. I mean, since I'm your favorite grandchild."

She kissed his cheek. "That you are."

"Hey there, young Eric," Jeffy said as she came downstairs. "I thought I heard a male voice. I was hoping that somehow Cam made it home early."

He looked her over. Her belly was bigger than Desi's. Much bigger. "When are you due again, Aunt Jeffy?"

She put her hand on her stomach. "November 30th. Why?"

"I was comparing you to the homeless girl that's staying with us right now."

"Oh, yeah, I heard all about her. And her boyfriend. Interesting story."

"Who told you? Mom?"

"How'd you guess?"

"She's due at the end of January, so, you're a couple months ahead of her. So, you're comin' in the home stretch. How are you feeling?"

She sighed. "A little tired. But it's helped to stay fit and keep up with my workouts. This little guy has been kickin' up a storm lately though. I think he wants to come out."

"I felt the baby kick," Angelina said.

"Me too," Manny said quickly.

"Oops, and there he goes again," Jeffy said, pressing her hand against

the side of her belly.

"Really?" Eric said.

"Yes, here, give me your hand."

He stood and went to her and she took his hand and placed it on the spot.

"I don't feel anything," he said.

"Ya gotta be vewy still and quiet," Angelina said.

After about fifteen seconds, the baby kicked again. "Ow," Jeffy complained. "That was a hard one."

"Wow," young Eric said reverently, wonder in his eyes. "Wow, Aunt Jeffy, that is so cool."

Shelley grinned. "I know, right? It's almost like we don't really get that there is an actual person in there until he makes it known to us."

"I can't wait to see him," Jeffy said.

"Hey, can you like, read his mind?" young Eric asked.

She shook her head. "I can feel his heartbeat, I can tell that he's healthy. I sense an amazing amount of love and emotion. But I can't read his mind."

Jeffy reached up to touch young Eric's face. "I'm so happy to see you, Eric. I knew you were alive. I knew there was lots of dirt and I knew you were in Mexico, but I couldn't pinpoint where you were. I'm sorry."

He pressed his hand over hers. "It's okay."

She gasped and jumped back. "Oh, oh no, Eric." Putting a hand to her head, her eyes closed and she started to sink down. Young Eric caught her, lifted her and took her into the living room to lay her on the sofa.

Shelley was right behind them. "Eric, run upstairs real quick to the kid's room and ask Melody to come down."

"Who?"

"Just do it and ask questions later please."

Eric ran up the steps and went to the kid's room. Melody looked like a young high school girl and it appeared she was changing the bed linens. He knocked on the door frame so that he wouldn't startle her.

She startled anyway and turned with a gasp.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you but my grandmother asked me to come get you." He turned and went back downstairs with Melody right behind.

Shelley looked up as they entered the room. "Melody, will you watch the children for a few minutes?"

"Yes, of course," she said sweetly and went into the kitchen immediately.

Worriedly, young Eric glanced at his Aunt Jeffy. She was now sitting up, but there were tears on her cheeks. He went to her and knelt in front of her. "Is she okay?" he asked his grandmother.

Shelley nodded. "She's fine. She had a vision."

"Must have been a bad one. What did you see?"

Jeffy shook her head.

"She saw and felt your experience."

His face fell. "Oh." He sighed. "Aunt Jeffy, I'm so sorry. I should've thought to not come near you."

"Don't be silly," she said as she sniffed. "I should've protected myself. I wasn't thinking. Eric, what you went through, what you experienced, I'm so sorry. You need to work with Dad."

"I just had a session with him a little while ago. And one with my dad this morning. I'm struggling a bit, but I can handle it."

Jeffy nodded. "Yes, I know you can. You are strong. I can feel that too. And you are filled with guilt. Second-guessing yourself. Your brain is running different scenarios over and over trying to find another way you should've done things. But Eric, you won't find the solution, because you were following God's orders, and you did things exactly the way He told you. He said to fight hard. He said it several times."

"You saw all that?"

"Yes. And more."

"Ya know some people would ask why would God, God who is love, why would He want me to kill people?"

"Don't let people get into your head. Remember Eric, those men are now on the other side. Some Christians say that's it. They're done. They're going to hell. But we don't know what kind of relationship is between them and God. We know the general rules, but we don't know anything concerning anyone other than ourselves. Jesus might be done with them, or He might not. What happens to them now is between them and Him. And Eric, God *is* love, but He is real, true love. God is also a warrior. He's our 'Commander in Chief.' So, when He commanded David to kill the Nephilim giant Goliath, do you think David should've felt guilty about what he did?"

"No." He nodded as his mind grasped what Jeffy was saying. "David was doing the will of our Father. And I was too. But..."

"There is no 'but,' Eric. We do His will. It hurts us because we still don't grasp the eternalness of our being. But He does. Try to see it from His perspective. Death is not such a big deal in the larger picture. God decided that these men needed to be stopped. Maybe if you hadn't taken them out, they would have killed Josie, who maybe was supposed to do some great and wonderful thing. Or maybe they would have killed you both, and Jordan wouldn't be able to go on without you. Or maybe they were going to do something else to someone else that God just could not allow. So, He used you, one of His mighty warriors to do what needed to be done. Are you gonna second-guess God?"

"No, of course not. I was second-guessing myself. Did I really do what he asked me to do?"

"Well, lucky for you, I can see into your mind, and I'm telling you, yes, Eric, you did what He asked you to do. The five whose lives you

ended, God must have decided that they didn't have any more earthly chances. The two whose lives were spared, God is giving them another chance." She paused. Smiled. "Sweetie, you did good. You did good. I heard clearly what He told you." She smiled. "Eric, I would go in and help you, release some of the ache in your heart, but I promised Cam I wouldn't do it anymore until after the baby is born."

Young Eric nodded. "I completely understand and I wouldn't want you to take on any of this anyway."

"Well, that is my decision, not yours. And I'd do it in a second, but I need to protect my child first. I don't really know if he feels what I do because he's inside my body. So, I need to make sure he's okay."

"Again, I understand. But still, thank you, Aunt Jeffy. You've already helped me a lot."

She drew a deep breath and nodded. "So, now that I happen to know everything you went through, if you ever just want to talk about it, I can listen."

"I do not wanna talk about it. I want to forget it."

"Well, I know that you know that talking about it will help you forget it and keeping it bottled up will make it fester."

"Okay, yes, I know, but I've already had two sessions today, three if you count this, so, that's enough for the day, right?"

She smiled. "Right."

He rose and held his hand out to her. "Can I help you up?"

"Yes. I'm gonna go get a snack before dinner. Mom, I guess it's just you and me and the kids for dinner."

Shelley nodded. "Unless we can talk young Eric into sticking around."

He smiled. "I guess I could do that. I mean, Mom is out with Alec and Desi, and I have a feeling she'll be calling Dad and have him meet her somewhere to eat out. And I'm really tired and don't want to go anywhere."

"Where's Jordan?"

"She's at school."

"Do you want to give her a call and invite her to dinner?"

He thought. "No. I want to give her a rest from all of the drama and let her just relax and focus on herself for a minute."

Jeffy and Shelley both frowned but didn't say anything. Jeffy went into the kitchen, leaving just Eric and his grandmother.

Eric yawned. "Maybe I'd better go do what I promised Granddad I would do, which is to sleep."

"Yes, go do that," Shelley said sweetly.

"Oh, and, who is Melody?"

"She's such a sweet girl, isn't she?" Shelley said.

"Uh, I wouldn't know. She's cute."

"She's my new helper."

"Like, a housekeeper?"

"No, like with the children. She volunteered to go up and change their beds for me and I've promised your grandfather that I would allow any and all help."

"Good. So, how old is Melody, because she looks really young."

"She's eighteen. Just graduated from high school this past spring. She worked all summer as a server, but wanted something different. She's not sure about college, so decided to work until she gets sure. I really like her."

He grinned. "Of course you do."

"She loves the children."

"Who wouldn't?" He yawned again. "I'm gonna go sleep."

He just started up the steps when the kids came running. "Eric, where are you going?"

He turned and sat on the steps. "I'm goin' upstairs to take a nap."

"But we wanted you to tell us a story."

"Oh, well then, come on up, you can tuck me into bed, and sit on the bed and I'll tell the story and then, if I fall asleep, you have to tiptoe out of the room very, very quietly and don't wake me up, deal?"

"Yes!" they all yelled.

"Okay, so, everyone get in your quiet mode and tiptoe upstairs so I can see if you really do understand."

They all tiptoed up the steps while Shelley watched with a smile. She turned and looked at Melody standing beside her, also smiling.

"I'm sorry, Melody, I didn't even introduce you to young Eric."

"That's okay. I figured out who he was."

"Why don't you stay for dinner and I'll introduce you?"

She nodded. "I can do that. That way I can spend some extra time with the children."

"Wonderful!"

"Um, Mrs. Kino?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I just love this job. I'm falling in love with the children and you, and Jeffy and I'm really glad that you came into the restaurant that day, and that I got to serve you and Mr. Kino, and the children. I was so tired that day, and almost called in. Thank goodness I didn't."

Shelley smiled. "Thank God. All of those things are not just a coincidence. It's all part of His plan. And when I saw you and heard you speak to the children, I knew immediately that you were perfect for what I was looking for, which was not only someone to help with the children, but someone I could help too."

"Well, you *have* helped me. And my mom is really glad about that, and my dad is what he calls, cautiously optimistic, and actually, my two younger brothers are jealous."

Shelley laughed. "Why are they jealous?"

"Because they practically worship your son and daughter. They've watched

every single movie they've ever made, several times. And they are glued to their social media and follow Gabe and Taylor. And they can't stop talking about JoJo and how good he is. And young Eric, as you guys call him, they are going crazy waiting for the Kino Challenge and for the Mini-MART."

"They like martial arts?"

"Oh, yeah. They love it. They took classes for a while at one of the Kino studios, but then they got into high school and started playing sports and they didn't have time anymore."

"So, do you think they would like to come and see the Mini-MART or the Challenge in person?"

"Are you kidding me? They'd go crazy for that."

"Well, then, please, invite your whole family."

"Really?"

Shelley laughed. "Nope, just teasing."

Melody grinned. "Haha, Mrs. Kino."

"Yes, really," Shelley amended. "Besides, I was gonna ask you if you would come and help me with the children so that I could actually get to watch at least some of the action."

"Oh, yes! Definitely. So, which one, the Mini-MART or the Challenge?"

"Both actually. And invite your family to both. I'll get you the tickets."

"Wow, this gig just keeps getting better and better."

Shelley giggled. "Melody, you are so adorable."

✞✞✞

Jeremiah 29:11

"For I know the plans I have for you,"
declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future."

Chapter Five

October 23rd, Wednesday, Late Afternoon
UCLA, Los Angeles, California

Jordan gathered her books and purse and headed out of the classroom. She was so sleepy she could barely keep her eyes open. She'd been up half the night with Three. She'd risen at six and been going full tilt, except for the little power nap she'd taken before this class. She didn't usually drink coffee, but if she was gonna get her makeup work done, she was gonna have to make an exception today. She was starving because she hadn't eaten lunch, and unfortunately, the cafeteria, where her meal was already paid for, didn't reopen until five. So, she would head to the campus coffeehouse. She could afford some coffee, and then she'd head back to the apartment. There was always ramen or peanut butter and jelly there.

She threw her books and purse onto the passenger seat and drove the mile or so to the coffeehouse. Funny, she thought, she'd been spending so much time with Three that she'd stopped thinking about things like what kind of food she could or could not afford. Of course, if she needed anything she knew she only had to ask, and he'd take care of it, but she had some pride. So, she'd count her pennies and be careful what she spent. She pulled up and headed in and walked up to the counter.

"Hello, what would you like?"

"Um," she smiled. "Ya know what? I don't know. I don't usually drink coffee, but I'm so sleepy and I need to study. What do you recommend?"

The guy standing on the side waiting for his coffee turned and smiled at her. "Do you like bitter or sweet?" he asked.

She glanced over at him. "Oh, definitely sweet."

"Something hot or cold?"

"Hot, I think."

He smiled. "You'd probably like a mocha, maybe with an extra shot of espresso."

She nodded at the Barista. "I'll try that." She turned back to the guy. "Thanks for your help."

"You're welcome." He handed the guy a five-dollar bill.

"Oh, no, please don't."

He shoved the bill at the barista. "I insist and I won't take 'no' for an answer."

Sighing, she nodded and then looked closer at him. "Hey, aren't you the guy that..."

"That helped you gather up your books outside history hall? Yes. Mason Cole." He held out his hand.

She shook it. "Well, thank you again, Mason. What a strange coincidence." Even as she said the words she knew exactly what Three would say, "there is no such thing as a coincidence."

He smiled. "Sometimes things were just meant to be."

Her brow furrowed because she needed to nip that in the bud. "Well, before you go any further, I need to tell you that I have a boyfriend."

He frowned. "Oh, now, that *is* disappointing news. So, where is he?"

Sighing, she shrugged her shoulders. "Probably in bed right now. He's recuperating from, um, an accident."

Mason smiled. "Well, at least he has a pretty good excuse for not being here with you."

"Oh yes, he really does."

"But since you're here and I'm here, at least have coffee with me."

She smiled up at him. "Well, since you paid, I guess it's the least I can do."

They sat at a small table near the front window. She tasted her coffee and smiled up at him. "Wow. This is really good!"

"I'm glad you like it. So, what's your name?"

"Oh, well that was rude of me, wasn't it? I'm Jordan."

"Very nice to meet you, Jordan."

She nodded. "Likewise."

"So, what year are you?"

"I'm a freshman. How about you?"

"Junior. How old are you?"

"I'm nineteen."

"Ah, a late starter."

She nodded but didn't offer any other information.

"I'm not judging," he said with a smile. "I only know because I also got a late start."

"Oh, so then, how old are you?"

"I'm twenty-six."

"Oh, well, that is much later than me."

He nodded. "Yeah, I got a late start too. So, what are you studying?"

"Business, what about you?" Jordan asked.

"Computer science."

She nodded and took several sips of her coffee, enjoying the sweetness. They chatted about some campus events while they drank their coffee and finally sat in silence.

He smiled at her. "Well, Miss Jordan, the business major, I think you are one of the most beautiful girls I've ever met."

She frowned. "Oh, please."

"Too much too soon?"

"Too much ever. I did tell you I have a boyfriend."

"You did, and again I find that very disappointing. So, where did his

accident occur? Because there was a huge wreck on I-5 a few days ago."

She shook her head. "No. It happened in Mexico."

"Oh! Interesting. Were you with him?"

"No."

"So, he went to Mexico without you?"

"It couldn't be helped."

"Jordan?"

She looked up at the familiar voice. "Logan?" She stood and hugged him. She felt such a relief to be hugging a member of Eric's family and she didn't want to let him go. She squeezed him hard, and finally, he stepped back.

Logan looked past her to the guy at the table, then back at her. "Jordan, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Uh, this is Mason. He helped me out earlier today when some guy ran into me and—"

"In your car?"

"No, he was just running and knocked into me and I dropped all my stuff and Mason stopped to help me pick everything up."

Mason stood, Logan moved forward and shook Mason's hand, quickly sizing him up. "Mason, I'm Logan Adams, nice to meet you and thank you for helping out our girl." Logan spoke kindly but purposely and pointedly took possession of Jordan.

"Our girl?"

Logan nodded. "Yes, she's like a sister to me."

"Oh. Well, it was no problem. I mean, a beautiful girl in distress, who could resist stopping to help, right?"

Jordan laughed. "Apparently, a lot of people."

Logan looked closely at Jordan. "I didn't know you drink coffee."

"I usually don't, but I have a lot of makeup work and studying to do and I needed something to help me stay awake tonight. I didn't know you drink coffee either," Jordan challenged.

He smiled. "I don't. But a friend of mine is doing a special event here at the coffeehouse, he's proposing to his girl, and he wants me to sing for him, and I'm here getting the setup." Logan reached for his phone as it buzzed. He pulled it up and smiled at the text. "Oh, it looks like we're having dinner at the Grands' house with young Eric."

Jordan shook her head. "I don't know if I can go, I have so much work to do. Besides, I haven't been invited."

"Check your phone."

She turned and got her purse and pulled out her phone. She had a text from Three, but it didn't say anything about coming to dinner. She shook her head. "No, Logan, I'm not invited. It must be a 'guys-only' thing."

Logan frowned. He didn't miss the look on her face. "I'm sure you'll get an invitation any second now."

She shook her head. "No, Three wants me to focus on my own life for a while and said he'd see me at the memorial."

Logan sighed. "Okay. I get it. But Jordan, don't take that as some kind of parting. He just needs to get his act together."

Mason rose then. "Well, this sounds like a private conversation. Jordan, it was very nice to meet you, and uh, you too, Logan, but I guess I'd better get going and you need to get studying." He leaned closer to speak to Jordan privately. "But I have to say, since I overheard, that if the guy you're talking about is your boyfriend, and he needs to 'get his act together,' then maybe you should consider getting a new boyfriend." He pulled back, smiled and nodded.

"You're out of line," she said softly and then louder, "but thanks for your help earlier today and for the coffee, Mason. Nice meeting you. Maybe I'll see you around campus."

Mason nodded with a smile. "Oh, you can count on it." He nodded at Logan, turned and left the shop.

Logan watched him go, his eyes narrowed. He looked back at Jordan. "Does he know you have a boyfriend?"

Jordan's eyebrows rose because she wasn't sure if she liked his tone. "Yes, he knows because I told him immediately, but it didn't seem to matter."

"And that should tell you a little bit about his character."

Jordan nodded because he was right about that. She smiled at Logan. "It absolutely does. And Logan, your loyalty to Three is admirable, and you don't have to worry about mine."

Logan grimaced. "Sorry if I came on too strong. Ya know, I always have my brother's six."

She nodded. At that moment three girls walked into the coffee shop. Logan glanced over and frowned.

"Logan?"

He sighed and turned with a polite smile. "Well, hello, Angi."

Jordan turned too. "Hi Angi."

"Hey! Jordan, right?"

Jordan nodded.

Angi came straight to Logan. "Logan, I saw you on TV, and I saw that video of you singing at the restaurant in Nashville. You were amazing."

Logan nodded. "Yep. Thanks. It was a fun time."

"So, we should go out again," Angi continued.

"Well, I'm really busy right now. I have no time on my schedule. I have several gigs coming up and rehearsals for the Fall Musical."

She frowned and reached out and touched his arm and gave a little mewl of disappointment. "I understand. Oh, and I heard what happened to your cousin. I'm glad he's okay. Tell him I said so."

He sighed. "Yep, I'll surely do that. So, Jordan and I were just leaving. Maybe I'll see you around campus," he said, making Jordan chuckle. He took Jordan by the arm and escorted her out.

"Okay, well, call me," Angi said as they left the shop.

"Where's your car?" Logan asked.

"That way."

He walked her to her car. She turned when they got there. “Thanks for seeing me to my car.”

“No problem.”

“So, uh, tell Three I said ‘hello.’”

“I will. Chin up, Jordan.”

She nodded, but couldn’t keep the look of trepidation from her expression.

He took her by the shoulders and waited for her to look up at him. “Jordan, he loves you.”

She nodded.

He pulled her to him and hugged her.

She sniffed.

When he set her back she shook her head. “Does it seem just too weak that I don’t want to be away from him for even a day?”

He shrugged. “I really can’t say, cuz I’ve never been in love like you guys are. But I think after all you’ve both been through over this past several weeks, it’s understandable. Don’t be too hard on yourself and don’t be hard on him. Trust him.”

She nodded, turned, and opened her car door. He held it for her, shut it, stepped back, and gave a salute. She drove away.

When she got back to the apartment, both Jackie and Colton were there.

“Well, there she is,” Jackie said. “I was beginning to think we’d never see you again.”

Jordan smiled and hugged them both. “Well, I obviously can’t leave you two for too long of a time because you’d run out of dishes and towels.”

“Yeah, thanks for cleaning up. We came in and thought a fairy had waved her magic wand. Sorry about the mess. We’ve been busy, but we know you have too,” Colton said. “Now, finally, you’re here. Sit down and tell us all about everything that happened.”

“I don’t have time. I really have to study.”

“Aww, come on,” Jackie said. “We’ll set a timer. You talk to us for thirty minutes. After that, you can go study.”

Jordan nodded. “Okay. Thirty minutes and I mean it.”

“Awesome!” Colton said.

“Now, first things first,” Jackie began. “Are you still a virgin?”

✝✝✝

Later Wednesday Evening

Still at UCLA Off Campus Housing

Jordan glanced at the phone when it buzzed and smiled. “Hey Three.”

“Hey Two-Three. How was your day?”

“Hmm, well, I hate to say it, but it’s been a tough day.”

“Why do you hate to say it?”

“Because, it makes me seem weak, I guess.”

“I’m not following you. How does having a tough day seem weak?”

“Well, it was tough because I felt alone. Like, well, I can’t explain it.”

“Try.”

She heaved a heavy sigh, thinking how much he sounded like Grandmaster Kino at the moment. "I guess it felt like I was on my own. I've grown so accustomed to having your strong presence in my life, and you sent me away and I think I've floundered a bit."

"Jordan, I didn't send you away."

She was silent.

"Babe, please don't feel like I don't want to see you. I do. I miss you terribly. I want you here with me. Please believe me."

She sighed. "I do believe you. I understood this morning when we spoke that you just need some time alone, some healing time, I guess. I understood that and I went out cheerfully willing to help you by focusing on my own life. But then I had a bad practice, and it seems the minute I thought about calling you to talk to you about my crappy practice, and then remembered you needed some time away from me, and I felt suddenly so vulnerable. I realized I couldn't call you, and it was actually scary.

"And then, right after that, I had to say goodbye to Agent Trout, and realized I'd grown accustomed to his presence too. Suddenly I was really alone. It, like, never really bothered me before I met you. Somehow, I've become completely emotionally dependent on you. Actually more than emotionally."

"Well, I've become dependent on you too, Jordan. If not, why would I be calling you, desperate just to hear your voice. Babe, it's not that you can no longer stand on your own. It's that when two people love each other, they naturally want to turn to each other. I'm sorry I told you to focus on your life. That's not how I meant it. I just didn't want you to forget about the things that I know are important to you while you're worrying about me."

"I get that, Three. I do. But now that I know you, now that I love you, and I know you love me, I can't stand the thought of being away from you. I realize that's not very mature. So, I will try to be more grown up and take care of my business. But I tell ya, Friday morning, I'm coming straight to you."

"I can't wait."

"So, are Alec and Desi still staying with your family?"

"Yeah, their house won't be ready for a few weeks, so, they're gonna hang around."

"Lucky them," Jordan said. "I'm so glad you made that appointment with Nick and then knew it was so important for you to keep that appointment."

"Not my doing. God uses us to do His work."

"Well, I'm proud of you for doing God's work."

"Thanks, babe. Well, I guess you're pretty tired."

"Actually, it's probably you who's tired. I'm wide awake."

"Oh, yeah, that's right, you had coffee with some guy today."

Jordan giggled. "That Logan, I tell ya, he definitely is loyal."

Eric chuckled and nodded.

"Anyway," Jordan began, "I went to get coffee because I have a lot of assignments and studying to catch up on and I needed to stay awake."

"It's not good for you. It's highly addictive."

"I don't do it very often."

"Logan also told me that someone ran into you?"

"Yeah, no big deal. Some dude running across campus knocked all the stuff out of my hand. So, since Logan was so busy tellin' on me, did he tell you that Angi came into the coffee shop and hit on him?"

"No, he didn't tell me that part."

"Three, that girl has no shame. She told Logan she saw him on TV and that they should go out again sometime. He pretty much told her he didn't have time. He was kind but very clear." She sighed. "Ya know, when Logan came into the shop today, I felt so happy to see him. And then he walked me to my car and I hugged him and I didn't want to let go."

"Uh, whaddya mean? Should I be jealous?"

She giggled. "No. I mean, like, he knows me, and he's part of your family, and like, with him there, it was comforting. Reassuring. Like, I wasn't alone anymore. It was like a member of the family, your family, was there with me and it was comforting because they really are like, the people that know me best. A strong member, someone like you, someone I could totally depend on. I mean, I guess I'm talking about what I said earlier. Being away from you made me feel vulnerable. I've not only grown dependent on you, but I think I've become dependent on your entire family. I think, even if it had just been Taylor, I still would have felt relieved."

"It's not MY family, Jordan. They are now our family. Yours and mine. And you have just given them a huge compliment. Because you recognize their strength, that comes from God, and it makes you feel safe. I love that."

"Oh, Three, when you say stuff like that. Ugh, I miss you so much."

"Would you like me to drive up there and stay on your couch?"

"I would love that, but I can't ask you to do that. You're supposed to be resting. And I'm supposed to be studying."

"Wow, that sounds like a turn down."

She giggled. "I guess it was. Though I may change my mind about that in a few hours."

"Well, if you do, call me. I'll drive like you and get there really fast."

She laughed. "Go to sleep, Three. I love you."

"Good night, Two-Three. I love you too."

✞✞✞

October 24th, Thursday Morning

UCLA, Los Angeles, California

Jordan finished stretching and left the weight room. It was a conditioning day and the good thing about that was at least she couldn't mess anything up. Run, bike, lift weights, no skill involved.

She hit the shower and dressed quickly, all the while thinking about what Three was probably doing. He'd probably already come up from the beach and was making a smoothie or eating breakfast or sitting around the kitchen table speaking with Desi and Alec. She grabbed up her bag and headed back to her

car to go make her first class.

Still, she couldn't pull her mind from the family. Gabe was probably staying back at Grandmaster Kino's home, and would probably already be deep into training. Taylor would be at school. Jordan's own family would be doing their thing. Her mom would be at work, her brother and sister at school. Oh, wait, her mom wouldn't be at work because she was helping with the memorial, baking hundreds of her cookies. Mr. and Mrs. Kino seemed to seriously love her mother and her siblings. It seemed Ricky Kino was truly interested in setting her mother up in business, either running a restaurant, or a catering business. Jordan smiled at the thought of her mother doing what she loved and not struggling financially.

As Jordan neared her car she looked up to see a girl walk by. The girl looked familiar and nodded at her with a smile. Jordan smiled back at her and tried to remember where she'd seen her before but couldn't place it. She stood there watching her walk away.

"What are you doing on this part of campus?"

Startled by the voice that was so close, Jordan turned with a gasp.

Her eyes opened wide. "Mason! You scared me."

He smiled. "Sorry. I saw you standing here and had to say 'hello.'" He gestured around. "Why are you way over here at the sports complex?"

"It's a conditioning day."

"A conditioning day? What are you conditioning for?"

"I play softball."

"You're on the team?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Oh wow! A new layer. I didn't peg you as an athlete."

Jordan frowned. "Well now, that's not good to hear."

"Oh, I mean, well, you're just too beautiful to be roughing it up on a softball field."

Jordan shook her head. "Well, that statement is completely false, because I can rough it up with the best of them."

He grinned. "I bet."

She nodded. "Well, I have to get going."

"How about some coffee later?"

"No, thanks. It does its job too well. I couldn't sleep last night."

"Okay, how about lunch?"

"Do you remember me telling you that I have a boyfriend?"

"Yes, but I've decided to not let that deter me."

Jordan shook her head. "Have a nice day, Mason." She started to open her car door but he put his hand on hers.

"Aw, come on. Don't be mad at me. I mean, ya can't blame a guy for going after what he wants."

"I'm not mad. I just need to get to class."

"So, tell me, where is this boyfriend you say you have? Does he go to school here too?"

"No."

"What school does he go to?"

"Currently, none."

"Oh. So, is he like, an older guy?"

"He's twenty."

"He's twenty and he's not in school? What does he do?"

She smiled. "Right now he's just working on a little this and that."

"Wow, he sounds like a real winner."

She raised her brows at him. "Goodbye, Mason."

"I'm not trying to be smart, I'm just trying to make you see that you could probably do a lot better than that. Don't sell yourself short. You deserve a guy who's got his act together. One that invites you to dinner."

"What?"

"I heard what that Logan guy said to you yesterday."

Jordan gave a short laugh as she got in her car. "Give it up, Mason."

He grinned. "Never."

She backed up and pulled away, looking in her rearview mirror. He stood on the pavement staring after her with his cocky grin. He probably thought he was being cool, showing tenacity, her knight in shining armor who was gonna rescue her from a bad relationship. She shook her head. Some people just have no self-awareness.

✝✝✝

October 25th, Early Friday Morning

Freedom in Christ Church, Pasadena, California

Shelley Kino walked slowly up the aisle of the large church, looking things over. The *Freedom in Christ Church* was a prominent church and Christian school serving kindergarten through twelfth grade. The chapel/auditorium was huge and had a capacity of five thousand. Currently, flowers lined the sides and front of the chapel. There had been an outpouring of love and kindness from the people who'd learned of today's memorial.

The families of each of the young ladies whose lives had been taken after they'd given birth to the Kino children, had all been notified, invited and encouraged to invite anyone they'd like. Shelley had made sure that each young lady's portrait with her name and age was displayed on large stands across the front of the chapel. Each stand was surrounded by more flowers.

Also on display, surrounded by white flowers, were easels bearing each child's name, birth date, and death date against the silhouette of a baby. The five memorials honored the two stillborn children and the three who had been murdered. Only Maria had been given a name. Shelley and Eric had chosen names for the four who had not. They decided to stay with the biblical theme. The two stillborn girls were christened Rachel and Rebecca. The murdered male with Down syndrome was christened Luke, and the murdered male with the heart defect was christened Simon.

Eric Kino watched his wife as she moved from portrait to portrait, studying the women's faces. She was so lovely. Her long hair still thick and wavy, a

golden brown color mixed with some gray. She wore a simple straight black dress with short sleeves. The dress came to just below her knees. The black hose and black shoes accented the muscles in her legs. Her only decoration was the small gold cross Eric had given to her about ten years earlier for a birthday present. Thinking of her birthday, which was in two days, he remembered he needed to touch base with Bree about Sunday.

He watched Shelley as she moved to stand in front of the easels with her children's names on them. She reached out and stroked the black silhouette of the baby and his heart lurched. He'd never know or truly understand the maternal pull of a mother for her child, but he understood it was strong, even in this strange situation.

He looked up to see Logan and several of his friends coming up the aisle. Together they would be providing today's music. Logan would play the prelude music, and then one of his friends would take over on the piano to accompany Logan and the others in offering the opening song, "How Great Thou Art," which had been requested by two of the murdered mothers' families. Later, the same group would sing, "Amazing Grace," and at the end, Logan would offer up Shelley's request, "You'll Never Walk Alone."

Eric walked down to greet his grandson and friends. He shook Logan's hand, hugged him, and then shook hands with Logan's friends. They headed up to the stage, while Eric went to his wife and stood beside her. "Hello, Shelley girl."

She turned to him, her eyes glistening. "Hi Eric."

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Just thinking about the children, the ones we won't get to meet until after we're gone. And just thinking of you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, because, this memorial could've ended up being for you. And then, if you hadn't jumped in front of that bullet, it would include my sweet Noah."

"Those are 'what-ifs', sweetheart."

"I know. But really, I'm simply being grateful that both you and Noah are here, alive and well."

He brushed his hand over her cheek. "Me too." He kissed her softly. "People will be starting to arrive soon. Are you ready?"

She nodded, looked around. "Do you think we've done them justice?"

He smiled. "Only God can give them justice. We'll honor them the best we can."

"Are you nervous about speaking?" Shelley asked.

Eric's brow furrowed. "Of course not. This isn't about me. I will simply say what God has me say. I have faith that He will give me the words that will help these people the most. Are *you* nervous about speaking?"

"For some reason, I am. I'm not sure why."

"Just say what's in your heart, my Shelley girl."

She nodded with a smile. "I knew you were gonna say that."

She looked around one last time. Up in the back, in the corners and in the

center there were three cameramen, and videographers were already livestreaming from the chapel.

Eric and Shelley both looked up as a line of Ameritech agents filed in to take up positions throughout the chapel. They knew there were many more outside in the atrium and even more outside the building itself.

"Well, I guess we should go check on the kids and the rest of the family," Eric said.

Shelley nodded and they exited the chapel as Logan began playing the piano.

✝✝✝

Young Eric walked along the sidewalk on the side of the church waiting for Jordan who'd texted him and should be driving up any second. He smiled as he spotted her car coming up to turn left into the parking lot.

Jordan let her window down and told the attendant she was a member of the Kino family. He asked her name, checked his clipboard, spoke into his two-way, motioned her through and told her to go left and look for another attendant. She spotted him immediately waving at her, and pulled into the reserved space. Placing her keys and phone in her purse, she flipped down the visor of the car to peek in the mirror. She fluffed her hair and wiped at a smudge under her eye with her pinkie and smiled as Three came to stand in front of the car and watch her. Shoving the visor back in place, she smiled up at him.

He came to open her door. "Unlock the door please," he said.

The moment she did he opened it, took her hand and pulled her out and crushed her to him. The relief was immediate. He drew a deep breath, blew it out and held her even tighter.

She laid her head on his chest, put her arms around his waist and reveled in what she'd been craving since she'd left his house early Wednesday morning. "Can we just stay like this forever?" she mumbled.

"Oh, how I wish," he said softly.

Finally, she looked up at him. "Hey Three."

"Hey babe," he murmured. He let go of her just so he could use his hands to place on either side of her face, tilt her head up and kiss her.

The kiss was soft, and slow, and sweet, and loving, and reverent.

Finally, he stepped back and smiled at her. His eyes swept over her. "You look beautiful."

"Thanks. My dresser and stylist worked a miracle."

He smiled. "Jackie and Colton?"

She giggled. "How'd ya know?"

He looked her over again. Black slacks that belled out at the bottom, black shoes with a small heel, her black blouse was flowy, solid black at the top but white lilies printed at the bottom gave it just the right splash of color. Her long, blond, honey-gold hair was down, falling across her shoulders and around her face. Her makeup, which she almost never wore, was understated.

"Well," he began. "They did a great job, because you are perfect."

"Thank you, Eric."

He nodded. "Come on, we'd better get into the staging room."

"What's the staging room?"

"All the immediate families of the victims are meeting in one place. The female relatives of the murdered women will have a corsage presented to them. Then family by family they will file into the chapel."

"Sounds like you guys have this all planned out beautifully."

"Well, Grandma used an event planner that she's been friends with for many years. That's how they were able to put this together so quickly."

He took her hand and hooked it into the crook of his arm and escorted her into the church.

"Wow, this place is huge. And gorgeous," Jordan said.

Young Eric nodded. "I agree."

They got to the door of the staging area, which was a large anteroom to the left side of the chapel.

Eric and Shelley walked up at the same time.

"Good morning, you two," Shelley said softly.

Young Eric looked into his grandmother's eyes. She was already having a hard time. Her mood was somber. Her eyes, moist.

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Good morning, Grandma. I love you."

She sniffed. "I love you too, sweet boy."

"Well, let's go in," her husband said. He opened the door and held it for the other three.

The mood inside the large room was reverent rather than somber. Quiet. Everyone had a quiet knowing, that this was a sad occasion, but necessary, and that they all shared the same pain.

"Can you do it?" Grandmaster Kino asked his wife.

Shelley drew a breath and nodded. "This is as much for them as it is for me and I will serve them." She moved forward to the first person she saw and introduced herself.

"Young Eric," his grandfather said. "Will you and Jordan please follow Shelley around with those green boxes over there. Those are the flowers to be pinned on the ladies."

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, sir."

He and Jordan went to grab the boxes. They approached Shelley where she spoke to the first woman. As if rehearsed, Shelley took the offered corsage from Jordan and quickly pinned it onto a woman whose daughter had been brutally murdered. Shot in the back of the head and thrown into a mass grave at the back of the property where the daycare was located.

The woman sniffed and motioned to the girl standing next to her. "And this is Ashley, she's Lindsey's sister," the woman said.

Shelley nodded at a young girl, about the same age as Jordan. "Nice to meet you, Ashley," Shelley said. "I'm so sorry for your loss." She took the offered corsage from Jordan and pinned it to the front of Ashley's dress, then looked

back at the mother. “If there is ever anything we can do to help you, please don’t hesitate to ask. Just leave a message at the number you’ve been given. We’re happy to help in any way we can.”

The woman leaned forward and hugged Shelley. “Thank you, Mrs. Kino. And we’re sorry too. For the murder of your children.”

Shelley nodded with a smile. “Thank you. I know they’re with God.”

Shelley turned to meet with the next family, but the woman asked another question.

“Um, before you go, Mrs. Kino, may I ask, or, do you know, which of the ten children my Lindsey gave birth to?”

Shelley’s eyes filled with tears and understanding. “Yes I do. I’ve read the reports over and over.”

“Will you tell me?”

Shelley nodded. “Lindsey gave birth to a stillborn daughter whom we gave the name of Rebecca.”

The woman grabbed her daughter’s hand, tears running down her face. “Thank you for telling us.”

“Does it make you feel better, or worse?” Shelley asked.

“I’m not sure. I mean, I guess I was hoping that the child she gave birth to had survived, so that her life wasn’t given in vain.”

Shelley nodded. “Her life still was not in vain. We all have a plan for our lives. Each of us were meant to come into this world for a different reason. It’s hard to second-guess. Still, Lindsey brought you and Ashley much joy, am I correct? What things did you learn from her?”

“Learn? Well,” her mother thought. “She was such a light when she was younger. She was gonna make big things happen, she always said. She was always happy, so full of energy, so funny. She could find good in anything. That’s why she volunteered to be a surrogate mother. She thought it would be a good thing to help a woman have a baby who couldn’t have one on her own. That’s what she was told.”

Shelley nodded. “She sounds like she was a beautiful daughter of God. Who knows why she was called home. Find a way to be grateful for the time you had with her. Don’t get bitter. Forgive and be like you know she would want you to be. If you let her death destroy you, then the man who killed her, also killed you. Don’t let that happen. For Lindsey’s sake, use this as a stepping stone to rise up and do great things in her name.”

Ashley nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Kino.”

Shelley smiled sweetly. “You’re welcome. Remember, anything you need, call that number.”

She turned to go on to the next family.

Young Eric looked at Jordan, who looked up at him, her eyes wide. He just realized that this was gonna be a rough day for his grandmother. She would be drained by the end of it. He looked over to see his own mother pinning a corsage on a woman. She was moving around with Gabe and Taylor holding the corsage boxes. Good. At least Grandma had help. Then he realized his

grandfather and father, and uncles and aunts were also moving around the crowd, shaking hands, offering comfort and prayers and words of wisdom. They were ministering. Young Eric smiled. Lord have mercy, how he loved his family, who loved God, who loved Jesus, and strove every day to serve Them in some way.

Once all the flowers were pinned on, the event planner called everyone to attention. In her soft, calm and reverent voice, she gave instructions on where to sit, and what order the families would walk into the chapel. She had Gabe, Taylor, Jordan, young Eric, and JoJo hand out a copy of the program booklets to each person.

Young Eric looked the program over. They were well done, with two glossy full color pages dedicated to each victim, peppered with scripture quotes, and of course, the order of the program.

"We are about to start," the woman said. "So, Mrs. Kino, if you and Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Adams would like to gather your little ones from the other room, please do so now."

"I'll just text Melody and Luciana to bring them in," Shelley answered.

A minute later, the door opened and Luciana and Shelley's new young helper, Melody, ushered Sophia, Kelstyn, Emily, Ledger, Angelina, Abraham, Noah, Manny, and Nate into the room. The room grew silent as the children came in and the families of the murdered girls got a look at the children their murdered daughters had brought into the world. The children were being very quiet and obedient, which Shelley was thankful for. If they weren't, she had no doubt that their father would handle it.

"Lovely," the event planner said softly. She nodded and smiled. "Mr. and Mrs. Blakely, and your sons, you're first and you may go ahead into the chapel," the woman said kindly.

✝✝✝

The giant chapel/auditorium was filled to capacity. Everyone was quiet as Logan beautifully played a medley of both classical and popular songs on the piano. *Ave Maria, Amazing Grace, California Dreamin', Brown Eyed Girl, Let It Be, How Firm a Foundation*, and two different works of Bach. To listen to the amazing talent of the pianist and watch the families walk in and take their seats, it was stirring to say the least.

There was quite a stir in the congregation when the final family group entered. Eric and Shelley Kino walked in with their five young children and then in order from eldest to youngest, the rest; Ricky Kino and his family, Mark Adams and his family, Joey Adams and his family and finally a very pregnant Jeffy Kino Wallace and her husband.

Once everyone was seated, the senior pastor of the church rose and went to the podium. "Good morning, everyone," he said. He welcomed everyone to the solemn occasion, and directed everyone to follow the outline in the program. "Several of the bereaved families have asked for this opening song to be sung, so without further ado, I will ask Logan Adams and his group to come forward to sing, '*How Great Thou Art,*' and afterward, Grandmaster Ricky Kino will

offer an opening prayer." He turned and nodded at Logan and then went to take his seat.

Logan and the three other UCLA music students, accompanied by another, gave a beautiful, heartfelt rendition of the song.

Ricky's prayer was just as beautiful and heartfelt, imploring the Holy Spirit to attend today's service to give peace and understanding and comfort to the families. Both the song and the prayer already had many people in tears.

When the prayer ended, the pastor went back to the podium and stood behind the lectern. "Thank you so much, Ricky." He looked out with a smile. "I've known Ricky since we were in our twenties, and he has been a huge influence on me and on the path that I chose to walk, and that prayer shows how much light and power he carries. And as he would say, all glory to God." He nodded. "We will proceed with the program from here on out without any interference from me. So, Jim Blakely, I'll turn the time over to you."

Jim Blakely, who was the uncle of the murdered Tina Blakely, a thirty-year-old woman from San Francisco, came to the podium and began speaking about his niece.

After the five families who had wanted to give the eulogies for their loved ones, the congregation was treated once again to Logan and his group singing *Amazing Grace*, only this time the congregation was invited to sing with them.

Once the group finished and made their way back to their seats, the congregation sat up in anticipation of Grandmaster Eric Kino's remarks. The man rose, softly took his wife's hand, kissed it and then turned and made his way to the stage.

Bree, scrolling her social media to see what comments were being made about the livestream, raised her eyebrows as the comment section blew up. He hadn't even started speaking yet. It was so crazy.

Once Eric got to the lectern and adjusted the mic, the place was absolutely silent. He briefly closed his eyes. Those who knew him knew he was offering a short prayer over what God would have him say. He looked out over the congregation made up mostly of family and friends of the murdered women. His heart swelled with compassion.

He smiled kindly, taking time to look into the eyes of several of the large group of people looking up at him.

"My heart is full," he began. "Filled with compassion for you all, for your pain. And somehow, I pray that I can say the right words to help you find peace. God has shown me, very early in my life, that when we are in a tumultuous state of being, before we can find peace, we must be able to completely feel the pain. And in order to do that, I think we must get to know the other five young women, and truly feel the loss.

"You've already heard about five of these warriors, and yes, I call them warriors for a reason, which I will disclose in a bit. The five we've already been blessed to hear about have diverse backgrounds, diverse personalities and diverse reasons for volunteering as surrogates. They were not what some of the media articles supposed the young ladies would be. They were not drug addicts

looking for a quick buck. They had good hearts, good minds, and were noble souls trying to make a difference. The same holds true for the five I'm about to tell you about.

"Miss Jennifer Holman would have been twenty-five years old this past September. She was the eldest daughter of John and Trisha Holman. She has three siblings, two younger brothers now ages seventeen, and fifteen, and a younger sister who is now twenty. When her father, Army Lieutenant John Holman, was killed in Syria, Jennifer stepped up to help her mother and her siblings get through the heartache and also through the financial struggle. Jenny, as they call her, let her mother know that she didn't need to worry. Jenny would contribute to the family to make sure her two brothers and sister would be well taken care of. She would keep her part-time job as a server at an exclusive restaurant, and still go to trade school to become a chef, because she loved to cook for her friends and family. She would work hard, and she told her mother that she was not alone and she could depend on Jennifer.

"She'd done just that. She became a rock for her mother. She was about to graduate and already had a position lined up to take after graduation. She was almost there. And then she served dinner one night to the man who recruited her, the man whose name I will not honor by saying it aloud. He saw that she was young, healthy, and beautiful. He began to frequent the restaurant. He struck up conversations with her. Because she was innocent and naive, it didn't take him long to understand that a lump sum of money would be attractive to her so that she could help her family. And so, he sent a woman to the restaurant where she worked, and the woman was the one who told her about the surrogacy offer.

"She'd been told that she could remain at her job and keep going to school until the last few weeks of the pregnancy. She believed the woman. But shortly after the IVF resulted in a confirmed pregnancy and a heartbeat was detected, Jenny went missing. She brought a child into the world, and she gave her own life. She made a mistake. We can't blame her. Satan is so very deceiving. He makes bad things look good. Jenny only wanted to help her family and she gave her life in trying to do so. She is a warrior." Eric drew a deep breath and went on to tell a few happy things about Jenny and her family. Then, he moved on to the next young woman.

Young Eric looked around at the sniffles and tears as his grandfather, in his quiet, yet commanding voice, went on to tell the stories of the other girls. They were sad stories. And it hurt. And that was what his grandfather was trying to accomplish, allowing those in the congregation to hurt, to cry, to experience the pain completely. He wondered how he would soothe them at the end, because at this moment, it didn't feel like anything could soothe the pain.

Young Eric breathed a sigh of relief when his grandfather finally started telling about the last girl, who was Lindsey Thornton, the first people his grandmother had spoken to back in the staging area. He realized, out of all ten girls, only two of them actually had a father in the home. He also realized the importance of having both parents to raise up the children. The women who

lost their lives were doing their best to help their families. No wonder in the Bible, God is always talking about making sure we help the widows, orphans and the fatherless. It's important. Ultra-important. He brought his attention back to his grandfather as he began to sum everything up.

"You've just heard the stories of ten young ladies who are sadly not with us on this earth. We hurt. We miss them. We long to speak with them again, to hear their laughter again. Many of us here in this building, know that they are okay. They're with God. Yet, we don't want them to be with God, we selfishly want them here, with us."

"I know, because that's how I felt when my first wife—Ricky's mother—was dying. I cried, I screamed, and I prayed. I prayed so hard asking God to help me understand, and, He finally did. He spoke to me and told me that we each have a path to walk, a plan for our lives, and sometimes that plan doesn't coincide with what we think it should be. Still, God has a plan. A plan for each of us. Part of my plan, is to be in service to those whose lives have been touched by the dark forces, the evil of this world. Your lives have been touched by these things.

"These dark forces, they're real. However, God is also real. I've seen too many miraculous wonders to deny it. He is real. Jesus, the Son of God is also real. Another part of God's plan for me, is to raise up a family of warriors who will help to battle these dark forces. My entire family is focused on working against this evil. Each of you also have warriors in your families. Your daughters, sisters, nieces, who had their lives taken from them, they were also warriors. Each of them was trying to do something good and right, and they gave their lives for it. But they *were* warriors. Strong warriors. Beautiful warriors. And I have a feeling that some of their parents, or siblings, or uncles or aunts or cousins, are also warriors and that this event, this happening will be a catalyst to make them rise up and do amazing things.

"These young ladies brought ten children into this world, five of whom are still here with us. They are beautiful souls that came to this world in a strange way. The children are innocent in this. And the young women were also innocent in this. They all have been touched by evil and we can let that defeat us, or we can let that make us strong. I promise you, that my wife and I will raise our five new family members to love God, to be honest, true, positive, strong, faithful warriors who will battle the darkness by being a light, who will strive to do good in this world. By raising them in this way, we can honor your daughters who gave them life.

"It was an evil man and his minions who began this project, to steal eggs and seed from my wife and me and plant them in surrogate mothers to bring forth children to raise to do their evil bidding. But God saw what was happening, and He placed three guardian angels there with them. One, Luciana, a brave warrior herself, forgot about her own safety and stepped up and saved the children, and brought this evil to light. So, we will turn this evil plan on itself, and turn it to light as God directs us to do so.

"I know that some of you don't believe what I believe, and that's okay. I

understand. You can just think of these as the words of a silly, delusional old man. I am simply attempting to ease your pain, but, if I'm right, if what I believe, what I *know* to be the truth is real, then this is a beautiful chance to bring light and happiness to yourselves. If you can open yourself to what I'm saying, then you will find complete peace, and complete love. Those who have ears to hear will hear. That means, those who were meant to be part of this, who already belong to God and just don't know it yet, will not be offended by what I'm saying, but will be rejuvenated. I pray you will find that peace.

"Whatever happens here, will happen, I know, because God has a plan. Some of you might wonder, how can there be a plan when an innocent girl has been murdered? I'll tell you something God told me a long time ago, when the mother of my first child was dying of cancer and I asked God why? Why wouldn't He spare her life? God told me, 'There were many good people who prayed fervently for Me to save the life of my own Son and they just couldn't understand why I didn't step in and save his life, why I let him suffer. It was because the crucifixion of my Son was part of the plan. There is a plan. Trust it. Trust Me.'" Eric stopped and smiled. "It takes a little bit of faith to do that. But it has great rewards. Take a deep breath. Let the light into your sorrowful hearts. You will find peace.

"I usually don't preach about my faith and what I believe, but I asked God to lead my words today and I spoke what I felt He would have me speak. I pray God's healing light, the Holy Spirit, to descend upon each and every one of you, to heal your hearts and bodies and minds, to give you a calm feeling of peace, and give you clarity for your lives. I pray He will surround you with His love and I add my love to that, I send it to each and every one of you, and do so in the powerful name of Jesus the Christ, amen."

He drew a breath and smiled. "The next to speak, as you see in the program, is my wife, who will come up here and tell you about the five children she lost and never knew, and the five she has come to know and love." He looked out at Shelley sitting on the front row. "Shelley?"

Shelley handed a child off to Bree and headed up. Eric met her halfway and escorted her to the podium. He kissed her hand. Shelley turned to look out at the congregation.

"Wow! There are a lot of people here."

There was a smattering of laughter.

"Thank you, Eric," she began. "For so lovingly telling us about five of the beautiful young women we are here to honor, and thank you to the other speakers who so beautifully honored their loved ones." She paused. Blew out a breath. "This is a strange situation. I realize, that my pain in hearing about the death of five children of mine, children with my and my husband's DNA, but children I didn't even know existed, my pain is not the same. I hadn't spent time with them, I didn't know them, I didn't raise them. Still, as any of us would feel about any child, though a stranger, we hurt when we know a child has suffered. In the book of Matthew, chapter eighteen, verse six, it says, 'But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better

for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.'

"Please allow me to tell you who these children are, and I will do so in order of their births. First, there is Emmanuel Kino. We call him Manny. He loves to eat," Shelley said with a fond smile. "Then, there is Noah Kino. He loves to talk and is a charmer, or what some would call, a player."

She paused during the laughter. "Born third, was Rebecca Kino. She was stillborn. Fourth born, was our sweet Angelina Kino, who is also talkative and definitely believes herself to be the leader of the pack. Born fifth, was Abraham Kino, whose heart is just the kindest. Born sixth, was Rachel Kino. She was also stillborn. The seventh born was Luke Kino. Luke was born with Down syndrome and the evil woman in charge of all of this directed the evil man to end his life. He lived to be two weeks old."

She stopped, drew a breath. "The eighth born was Simon Kino. He was born with a congenital heart disease. I'm not sure why they let him live a little longer, but when he was two months old, he was suffocated, like Luke before him. Ninth born, was little Maria. She was a happy, healthy child, but when she was two years old, her caregiver discovered she was deaf. She had no idea that asking to have a doctor test her ears would result in her murder. They wanted no imperfections and Maria too, was suffocated. She is fondly remembered by her siblings, especially by Angelina who has named her baby doll after her sister. The evil man who killed these children was also the man that shot my husband, and almost killed him. But God had other plans."

She sighed. "Last born, but definitely not least, was Nathaniel Kino. The whole thing the perpetrators were looking for was another Kino genius, like our June Flower. Funny thing, if you can consider any of this funny, they were going to terminate our little Nate when he was tiny, because he had a club foot. But somehow, they changed their minds and gave him away instead. Ironically, Nate was the genius." She shook her head. "To the children who were so brutally murdered, and to the two stillborn little girls, we want to say, we love you and look forward to meeting you one..." She stopped because her voice clogged with emotion.

She drew a breath. "Sorry. We look forward to meeting you one day. The five children that remain, they are such a blessing and I love them with everything in me. And so does the rest of our family and friends. And so— I'm grateful. I'm grateful for the gift and blessing that these children are, and I'm grateful for your daughters who brought them into this world. I condemn the evil that touched them and ended their lives. But as my husband said, these children will live in honor of your children. Your children who absolutely were warriors. They were lights. They were honorable and full of love and I look forward to meeting them too, one day and thanking them in person.

"My family and I will all keep you all in our prayers. Be in love. Be at peace. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Mommy!"

Shelley turned to see Angelina streak toward the stage. She was scrambling

up on the steps before Bree could catch her. Eric chased after her. Angelina ran full-speed across the stage as Shelley moved toward her, bent down, and scooped her into her arms. Eric came up onto the stage and took Angelina for Shelley, then ushered his wife off the stage as some in the congregation chuckled, some cried, and some sat in silence.

Immediately, the pastor stood and came to the microphone. "We have a special request for the next musical number, sung by Logan Adams, and then the closing prayer and a blessing on the food will be offered by Mark Adams. Afterward, the families of the deceased are invited to lunch in the cafeteria. We'll see you in there." He nodded at Logan.

Logan rose with his own microphone and went toward the front of the stage. The pianist gave an introduction and Logan's beautiful, warm, clear voice rang out as he sang, *'You'll Never Walk Alone.'*

✝✝✝

Psalm 34:17-18

"The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

Chapter Six

The cafeteria had been set up with dozens of long tables covered in white tablecloths with beautiful centerpieces. The buffet was set up across the far wall and was exquisite. Young Eric and Jordan smiled at JoJo and Logan as they came into the room and headed straight to them.

"Hey guys," young Eric greeted. "Logan, you totally rocked this gig today. That last song, man, I got all choked up."

Logan grinned. "It's the song. The words are so good, I almost got choked up myself as I sang it."

"Where are your friends?" Jordan asked.

"They went home. I invited them to stay and eat, but they said they felt like they didn't belong and didn't wanna crash."

"It's not crashing if you're invited."

"Yes, that's what I said, but I think they felt out of place."

"Well, tell them they did a great job," young Eric said.

"I did, but I'll tell them that this time it was you who said so, so that will make them feel really good."

Eric chuckled. "Right. Let's grab some food." They turned and headed toward the buffet tables.

"Hey, wait," they heard and turned back around.

Gabe and Taylor and Alec and Desi approached, and the eight young people greeted each other. They went together to the buffet tables and came back to sit at the table right next to the one where their parents and grandparents sat.

Shelley, Luciana and Melody were busy placing children in their seats while Bree and Breez were placing plates of food in front of the kids. It was obvious that Nate was giving Melody a hard time, trying to get away as she tried to put him in his seat.

Logan had been watching and jumped up quickly when little Nate succeeded in his effort to break free. He scooped up the escaped child and carried him back to his seat and set him in it.

"I wanna go see Eric," he argued loudly.

"Eric will come see you, now you have a seat and obey what Melody says, you got it?"

Nate pouted. "Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Logan," Melody said softly.

"You're welcome. You have any more problems with this one, you just let me know, and I'll let Three know and he will be very disappointed."

Melody smiled. "Uh oh, did you hear that, Nate? I guess you'd better do

what I say."

Nate frowned.

Logan knelt down to speak to him. "Remember what your father talked about? How do we treat your Mom, and your aunts and your sister?"

"We are nice to them."

"Okay, well, we're gonna have to work on that answer, but for now, yeah, that's right. And how do you think you should treat Miss Melody?"

"I should be nice to her."

"To say the least. And you should obey her. Now, look at all this yummy food. Eat up and get big and strong."

Logan rose and smiled at Melody. "Are you gonna eat?"

"Yes, in a minute."

"Wanna come join us at the next table?"

"Oh, no, I'm here to help Miss Shelley with the children. But thanks, I do appreciate the invite."

Logan nodded. "I understand. I'm heartbroken, but I understand," he joked. "Maybe another time."

"Maybe."

He turned and went back to his table, took his seat and picked up his fork. He looked around at everyone staring at him. "What?"

"I think you have an eye on pretty Miss Melody," young Eric said.

Logan smiled and didn't deny it.

JoJo smiled. His brother just met her Wednesday at dinner at the grands' and he could tell immediately that he was interested.

Logan took a bite of his food and looked over at the girl. She wasn't a blonde, but her hair wasn't brown either. Maybe a dark blonde or very light brown. Caramel-colored. Her skin was olive colored, and her eyes were large and bright and beautiful. Maybe hazel. Her lashes were dark and long, her smile about as sweet as a smile could be. Her face a perfect oval. Her body, smokin.'

"She's really cute," Taylor suddenly said.

Logan turned his attention away from Melody and looked at Taylor to make sure they were still talking about Melody. "She's not cute, she's gorgeous," he argued.

Taylor smiled. "I agree."

JoJo grinned and young Eric smiled.

"Are you gonna ask her out?" Jordan asked.

Logan nodded. "Eventually. I don't wanna scare her away."

The guys laughed.

"What? Grandma finally found someone perfect to help her with the kiddos and if she quits because she was gettin' hit on by her employer's grandson, that wouldn't be good."

"So don't 'hit on' her. Just ask her out," Taylor said.

"Right?" Jordan agreed.

"So, JoJo," young Eric said, effectively changing the subject. "How has

practice been? Did you lose your spot by missing practice?"

"Nope. Coach understood. But I worked really hard at practice the past few days to make sure he knew I was okay."

"Sorry about the game last week."

JoJo shrugged. "It is what it is. I messed up. I couldn't concentrate, couldn't focus. All I could think about was you. What were you going through? Would I ever see you again? Were you in pain?"

"That's why I'm apologizing."

"Right. So, stop getting kidnapped and I'll be okay, got it?"

Eric nodded. "Got it."

"I guess I should be asking you how you're doing. I mean, how are you recovering, and I'm not talkin' about physically."

Young Eric sighed. "Well, each day I'm getting a little better. The nightmares are diminishing." He grinned and held his hands out. "My hands only shake now every once in a while."

Logan and JoJo glanced at each other. They understood that he was making light of it, but still suffering.

Young Eric rubbed his hands on his thighs and Jordan slipped one of her hands into his and squeezed. Young Eric looked over at her and smiled.

"So, what is the major problem?" JoJo asked.

"It's hard to say. I mean, taking a life is hard, but I'm not sorry really, so it's like a mixture of emotions." He looked at Gabe. "You know what I'm talking about, right?"

Gabe's lips pressed together as he thought. "Well, I had it a little easier. The guys I shot, it was at a distance. You had an up close and personal battle with all five guys. Much harder to do, much harder to make the images and feelings go away."

Eric nodded. "Yep. But still, it's getting better."

"Don't feel guilty," JoJo said softly.

"I don't. I mean, I don't think I do. Like I said, it's a mix of emotions."

"Even when you know it was something you had to do, it's still a hard thing," Logan said softly. "But it does go away eventually."

Young Eric and JoJo both nodded at Logan's words. He knew firsthand what young Eric and Gabe were feeling.

Jordan looked the boys over. Eric, Gabe, Logan and JoJo. Three of the four guys had been forced to take a life. They were indeed warriors as Grandmaster Kino was always saying. Her eyes went to Alec. He was a newcomer to the group and hadn't said much, but she had a feeling he too, was a force to be reckoned with.

Young Eric squeezed her hand. "So, Jordan, JoJo's game tomorrow against Cal is an early one. Will you come with me?"

She smiled, relieved that he'd asked her. She'd wondered if he would. "Yes, of course."

"Whaddya say I come get you early and we could go to breakfast and just spend some time together?"

"I would love that," Jordan said.

Young Eric looked over at Logan with a grin. "And that's how it's done, brother."

Logan snorted. "I'll keep that in mind." He glanced over at Alec and Desi. "So, you guys, what did you think about the memorial service?"

"It was pretty sad," Desi said. "But it was also beautiful."

"I agree," Alec added. "I'm not really religious, but like, it was stirring. Powerful."

JoJo nodded with a smile. "That stirring you felt, that's the beginning of the Holy Spirit speaking to you."

Young Eric smiled. The group went on to hear all about Alec and Desi's story and that ended with Alec asking JoJo and Logan about their father's law practice and let them know he was eventually gonna intern at the firm.

As they spoke, Jordan let her eyes wander around the room that was filled with the families of the ten victims. She noticed one woman who didn't quite seem right. She appeared very angry. Like she was all stirred up and she was pacing back and forth, from the doors toward the far back corner of the room, the corner that was adjacent to where the elder Kinos were sitting; Three's parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. The woman seemed to be staring at someone at that table. Jordan watched her as she moved closer to the table, then turned and paced away, but then turned and came back. Grandmaster Kino was there, and young Eric's father, and Mark and Joey Adams, and Jason and Justin Lee, so, she knew they were okay. Still, she wondered what the woman's problem was.

Young Eric tugged on Jordan's hand. "Hey babe, what are you thinking about so hard?"

She looked up at him. "I'm probably just being paranoid, but, that woman over there, the one against the far wall. She's not quite right. I mean, she seems angry, or maybe she's just one of those people who always has a negative type look on their face."

"Which one? The one with the red scarf around her neck?"

"Yes."

Both young Eric and Logan looked discreetly at the woman, while JoJo and Gabe waited so they weren't obvious.

Gabe actually stood and went toward the back wall, looking directly at the woman as he passed her. He slowly circled back and came back to the table.

"So, what did your recon accomplish?"

Gabe shrugged. "She's not carryin' on her person, but she could have a weapon in her purse. She does appear to be angry and she does appear to be staring at the grands' table, maybe at the children."

Young Eric took out his phone.

"Hello, Eric," Joey answered as he turned to look at Eric from about ten feet away.

"Hey Uncle Joey, so, Jordan has spotted a lady your agents need to keep an eye on. Back of the room, red scarf. White. Mid-forties. Angry."

Joey looked around. “Roger that. I’ll take care of it.”

But before Joey could even speak to the agents, Shelley rose, picked up Angelina and headed out, probably to take her to the bathroom. Jordan gasped as the woman immediately started toward Shelley. Jordan sprang from her chair and headed toward Mrs. Kino, young Eric right behind her. The woman got to Shelley before Jordan could and put out her hand to stop her. Shelley looked kindly at the woman.

“Can I help you?”

The woman drew back her hand as if to strike Mrs. Kino and Jordan ran up and grabbed the woman’s hand while at the same time, Shelley turned away, protecting her child.

The woman started screaming at Jordan, something about her protecting the person responsible for the death of her sister. The woman tried to pull her arm away from Jordan, but Jordan held her fast, and then Joey and young Eric and other agents were there. And just behind them were Gabe and Logan and JoJo.

Ricky and his father and Mark stayed near the children and agents closed in around the family.

Young Eric reached for Jordan’s iron grip on the woman’s arm. “You can let go, babe, they’ve got her.”

Jordan loosened her grip and stepped away.

Young Eric smiled down at her. “Way to go, Jordan. You saved Grandma.”

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. Instantly, her fierce look waned as tears gathered in her eyes.

He nodded. “I know. It’s okay.” He pulled her against him.

Meanwhile, JoJo put his arm around his grandmother and ushered her back to his grandfather.

“You okay, Shelley girl?” Eric senior asked as he put his arms around her and Angelina.

She smiled. “Yes, I’m okay. Don’t know what that was all about. She just came up out of the blue and acted like she was gonna slap me.”

Eric senior nodded. “It was all about, well, you know, people.” He bent down, looked into Angelina’s eyes. “How ya doin’ my sweet girl? You okay?”

“I gotta go to the bafroom.”

He chuckled. “Come on, Shelley, I’ll escort you.”

They walked out to the bathroom. The woman had also been escorted out by Joey and another agent. They took her to a room to question her and possibly offer her counseling or aid.

Young Eric and Jordan went back to their table.

Desi shook her head. “Wow, you guys try to do some good in the world and some lady tries to smack your grandmother.”

Taylor and Gabe both nodded. “Like our grandfather is always saying,” Taylor began. “When there is a light in the world, dark forces try to put it out. The darkness exploits anger and grief.”

✝✝✝

Gabe Tanner, always eager to get physical, convinced the group of young

people to spend the rest of the afternoon together and maybe grab dinner later. Everyone agreed except JoJo, who had to head back to school to attend a walk-through and team meeting.

Gabe was opting to go to a park and see if they could get in on a little pickup game of basketball, but was willing to concede to at the very least, a stroll along the boardwalk at Venice Beach. The guys had no problem because they always carried a change of shoes in their cars. The girls, however, had no such luck.

Jordan didn't care what they did, as long as she got to spend the rest of the day with Three. As Jordan and Eric walked out of the giant church, the bright sunshine made them smile. It was a beautiful day, the memorial was done, and they had some time to spend together.

As they strode along the walk headed to the parking lot, Jordan pulled up short as she spotted a girl. She looked familiar. Jordan was positive she'd seen the girl before, maybe around the UCLA campus. This time the girl had a camera around her neck. Jordan looked right at her as she passed and the girl smiled at her and nodded. Jordan actually stopped and turned and watched the girl walk toward the church doors.

"What's wrong, babe?" young Eric asked.

"I've seen that girl at the UCLA campus a few times. I'm sure of it."

"Okay, well, we're not very far away from there."

"Yeah, but aren't you the one who told me there are no such things as coincidences? Don't you think it's weird that I've seen her in the parking area of my apartment building, and also right here where your family is having a memorial?"

Eric nodded. "It is weird. Let's stay alert. She had a camera. Could be paparazzo."

"Oh." She looked up at Three. "I guess you're used to that."

"Not me so much, but my parents definitely."

"Don't worry, Three, it'll be you soon."

He grinned. "I'm not worried a bit. Worrying is a useless concept."

They arrived at Venice Beach and the seven of them strolled along. But when Gabe spotted the famous "Must Hoop" basketball courts, he had to get in on it. He went down to chat with some of the guys and came back with a grin. "Hey, Eric, Logan, Alec, wanna play some five-on-five?"

"Uh, not me," Alec said. "I'll stay with the girls and watch. You guys go ahead."

Gabe nodded. "Eric? Logan?"

"We're in," they said.

The guys went over to chat with some other guys and found two more players, then came back over to the small wall where the girls and Alec were sitting. "We have two games in front of us," Gabe informed.

"With all these people here," Jordan began. "I can't believe you're gonna get in at all."

Gabe grinned. "Well, a couple guys recognized me, and then they

recognized young Eric, so, like, there's that," he said with a chuckle.

As they waited their turn to play, people started making their way over to them, shaking hands, taking selfies, getting autographs. At least it made the time go by quickly as they waited for their turn. When the crowd realized Taylor Kino was with them, the excitement grew. A lot of people wanted selfies with THE Gabe and Taylor duo.

Finally it was their turn to play. Rules were 1's and 2's to fourteen. They lucked out to have a couple of real hoopers play with them on their team and they won four games before they lost. It was a good thing because Desi was tired and they needed to get her somewhere comfortable. There was a lot of autographs and handshaking and selfies before they could take their leave, but they finally did.

They walked along the beach for a little while, chatting about life and getting to know Alec and Desi a little better. It was a great day. They decided to head out to dinner at a local steakhouse that happened to have the same name as Gabe's girl, Taylor's Steakhouse. They were warmly welcomed by the establishment.

The dinner was delightful. The company was delightful. But the evening had to come to an end since they all had to get an early start in the morning. Gabe and Taylor, and Alec and Desi headed back to the south Kino estate. Logan headed to his home near Huntington Beach. Young Eric followed Jordan home to her apartment and accompanied her inside since both roommates were out partying.

Jordan immediately went to change clothes and get comfortable. She came out in some sweatpants and a t-shirt and barefoot.

Eric smiled at her. He truly loved this no-nonsense, 'take me like I am' girl. And to him, she looked beautiful. The sweats were gray. The shirt was a faded 'Hard Rock Cafe' t-shirt. She sat down next to him on the sofa. "Feel better?" he asked.

She sighed. "Much." She snuggled up under his arm. "This feels so good."

"Yes it does."

She turned to him. "So, I mean, you seem to be back to normal. Is that right, or are you still needing me to focus on my own life?"

He chuckled. "I'm sorry I said those words to you. In answer to your question, I'm feeling pretty good. So, I'm cautiously optimistic that I'm back to normal. Time to move forward. Get back to work. Win this Challenge."

Jordan nodded. "You will. I just know it."

He smiled.

"What time are you coming to get me in the morning?" she asked.

"Does nine o'clock sound good?"

She grinned. "Sure. I'm surprised it won't be earlier than that."

"Well, I have to meet with Dad downstairs in the weight room in the morning to max out and see how much strength I've lost."

"Do you feel like you've lost strength?"

"Actually, no. I feel pretty strong. Like I said, back to normal."

She smiled up at him. "Good. Then I'll see you at nine."

"Good. Don't forget to wear your jersey."

She chuckled. "I won't."

He used his thumb to tilt her chin up so he could look into her eyes. "Jordan, I love you, baby."

"I love you too."

"I have loved having this day with you."

"Me too," she said softly.

"You mean everything to me and I'm so grateful God brought us together."

"I feel the same way."

"Good," he murmured as he lowered his head and kissed her.

When he pulled away and raised his head she protested with a little whimper. "Stay with me," she whispered.

"Oh, how I want to. But I have to get up early enough as it is and I really should get some rest tonight."

"I understand. How about just ten more minutes?"

He smiled. "I can do ten minutes." He pushed her down onto her back and looked into her eyes, then softly kissed every inch of her face before he took her mouth again. Ten minutes later he stood at her front door. "Get some sleep. I'll see you at nine."

"I will."

"Lock the door when I leave."

"I will."

"Bye, Two-Three."

"Bye, Three."

✝✝✝

October 26th, Saturday Morning

UCLA Off-Campus Housing / Los Angeles, California

Jordan peered into the mirror as she brushed her hair. It was 8:00 AM. She'd had a bad night. She couldn't sleep. She'd tossed and turned. Colton had come in at midnight and that had wakened Jordan. She'd finally fallen asleep, it seemed, just before Jackie came in at three in the morning, and woke everyone. Jordan had gone out into the living room to make sure she was okay, and had to help her get undressed and into bed. Then she'd gone back to bed and slept for about thirty minutes and woke again.

It was gonna be a hard day, as tired as she was, and she decided that even though Three said it was bad for her, she was gonna run over to that coffee shop and get one of those delicious sweet mocha coffees with extra espresso. She started to leave, but decided to change shirts first. One really shouldn't wear a USC Trojan jersey when on the UCLA campus.

She changed quickly and drove the mile down the street to the coffee shop. She had plenty of time to get the coffee and down it before Three arrived to pick her up at nine.

The shop was much busier than she expected. Then again, it was a Saturday morning. She waited in line and finally ordered her new favorite drink. When

it was ready, they called her name at the other end of the counter and she moved forward.

"Jordan?"

She turned at the voice calling her name. Mason Cole.

"Oh, hello, Mason."

"Jordan, I heard them call your name and came to see if it really was you and it is! How fortuitous!"

Jordan shook her head and sighed.

"So, I see you're alone again."

"Not for long. Mason, you're just gonna have to stop all this."

"So, Jordan, do you really have a boyfriend or do you just say that to keep the boys away?"

She gave a soft laugh. "No, I really have a boyfriend."

"Will you not even consider that there might be a guy better for you than one who leaves you alone all the time?"

"No, I won't consider anyone else, and he doesn't leave me alone."

He took her hand and got down on one knee. "Please, Jordan. Just say you'll have dinner with me. Don't leave me hanging."

This attracted the attention of the people in the shop. Jordan looked around at the sudden quiet and realized they thought it was a proposal. She tried to pull her hand from his, but he wouldn't let go. "Mason, stop this. Let go of my hand."

✞✞✞

Young Eric smiled in anticipation as he drove. He'd been able to get away earlier than he thought and he was gonna surprise Jordan. He was only a mile from her apartment when he looked off to his left and saw her car parked in front of the coffee shop. He swung in and pulled in next to her car. He sighed, hoping she wasn't already getting addicted to caffeine.

He headed into the shop, looked to his left and pulled up short.

"Mason, stop this. Let go of my hand."

"I won't stop and I won't let go, not until you agree to go out with me."

Eric walked up and used his fingers to press down at the base of the guy's forefinger and pull up on the end of it. Mason yelped and released Jordan's hand immediately.

Jordan turned, startled when young Eric first touched her. She jerked her hand back as soon as Mason released it.

"Three! You're early! How did you know I was here?"

"I saw a car that looked like yours in the parking lot."

"How did you know it was *my* car?"

"License plate. You know. Numbers?"

Wide-eyed she looked up at him and then over at Mason who'd finally risen up off his knee. "Uh, so, this is not what it looks like."

He grinned at her. "Babe, you don't have to explain anything to me. I completely trust you."

Jordan smiled and her heart swelled. He was indeed perfect. "Um, Eric, this

is Mason."

Eric smiled at the guy. Nodded. "Mason."

Mason nodded slightly and looked at Jordan. "So, this is the boyfriend you spoke about?"

"Yes, and as you can see, he's real and not a figment of my imagination."

Eric laughed. "You thought she made me up?"

He shrugged. "You were never around. I was beginning to think that."

He nodded. "I've been indisposed."

"Yeah, she said you were in an accident."

He looked at Jordan with a smile. She shrugged.

"Yes, though I wouldn't call it an accident. Someone intentionally kidnapped me off the street and held me hostage almost three days."

Mason looked closely at the guy and it finally dawned on him. "Oh, wow, you're Ricky Kino's kid."

"Yes, I'm Eric Kino. Very good," he said dryly. "But I'm not a kid."

Mason looked him up and down. The guy was bigger than he thought he would be. Tall, very muscular. "Well," Mason said with a sigh. "I guess I'll just be honest and forthright with you."

Young Eric nodded. "I always appreciate honesty."

"Well then, I need to tell you that I won't give up. I won't give up on trying to get Jordan for myself. I'll wait for you two to be done. I'm sure your little fling with a normal girl will eventually come to an end and I'll be here to pick up the pieces." He nodded at Jordan. "I'll wait for you, Jordan. I'm patient."

"Well then, Mason," Eric answered. "I guess I need to tell *you* something. First, there is nothing about Jordan that is normal. She's special. And also, I appreciate your tenacity. I really do. 'Never give up,' that's what they say, right? But they also say that there's a time when you should cut your losses and bail. And that's where you're at right now. Jordan and I, we're together, and I will never let her go, not ever, unless she wants to be let go. Do you want that, Jordan?"

"No, I do not."

"But you guys aren't married, right?"

"Not yet."

"Are you engaged?"

"Not yet. Still, Mason, you only have two choices. Give up on the hope that you will ever have Jordan, we'll shake hands and we can be cordial about the fact that I found this beautiful gem first. Or, you can continue to pursue her against her wishes, don't shake my hand and consider me your foe, and *that* doesn't bode well for you."

"That sounds like a threat," Mason said.

"Oh, absolutely. It absolutely is."

Jordan giggled.

Eric turned and smiled at her. "Baby, I'm guessing you were picking up some coffee?"

She nodded. "Yes, I had a rough night."

"Do you still want the coffee?"

She shook her head. "Actually, no. I've lost my taste for it."

He nodded. "I'll stop somewhere and get you something good for energy."

They turned to look at Mason. "Well, we have a big day planned, so we're gonna head on out. You take care," Eric said, making it sound more like a warning than well-wishes.

They turned to see several people with their phones held up videoing and taking pictures. Eric nodded and smiled.

"Hey, Eric," one guy called.

Eric looked in the direction of the voice and smiled. "Yep?"

"Ya know you're wearing an ugly shirt."

Eric grinned. "Only in the eyes of some."

"That was a tough loss last week."

"Yep. JoJo is my brother, and he was worried about me, so it wasn't his best game. But he's back to normal today. And in three weeks when he plays you guys, he'll be better than ever."

"So, you pull for USC?"

"I pull for my brother. But I also pull for UCLA because I have another brother *and* my girlfriend who both go to school here."

The people in the shop all nodded.

"That's cool," the guy said.

"Hey, Eric," another guy called. "Are you still gonna fight in the Challenge? I mean, after everything that's happened?"

He nodded. "Yes, I am."

"Well, good luck, dude."

"Yeah, good luck," others said.

"Thanks everyone," Eric said with a grin.

The guy who'd asked about the challenge looked over at Mason who still stood there. "I wouldn't cross this guy if I were you."

Mason frowned.

"Can I get your autograph?" a girl asked, holding up a marker and pointing at the shoulder of her shirt.

Eric nodded and signed her shirt. Then they were inundated. It took them another fifteen minutes before they were able to get out of the shop. Jordan looked around as they left and realized that Mason had taken his leave.

Eric followed Jordan to her apartment and went inside with her.

Colton was awake. Jackie was not.

He chatted with Colton until Jordan finished getting ready, including putting her Trojan shirt back on.

When Jordan came back into the room, Eric rose.

"Oh, one more thing," Colton said. "I mean, I just wanted to thank you, Eric, for the tickets for the *Boots on the Ground* concert. I love me some country music."

Eric smiled. "Just the way you said that makes me understand why."

She laughed. "Anyway, you and Jordan are gonna double with me, right?"

"That was the plan."

"Good, cuz I have a date and I let it slip that you guys were gonna join us and he seemed pretty excited about getting to meet you."

Young Eric's lips pressed tightly together. He nodded. "We'll be there. But I hope your date wants to be there for you, and not for me."

She nodded. "I hope so too. He agreed to the date before he knew you were coming, so maybe it'll be okay."

"Good."

"And since the concert isn't until next month, he asked me to have dinner with him next week."

Eric nodded and smiled. "Really good." He held his hand out toward Jordan. "Ready?"

"Ready," she said. She ran over and hugged Colton.

"Go Trojans," Colton said, with very little enthusiasm.

Jordan laughed.

They got as far as the car before Eric took her in his arms and kissed her.

He brushed his hand over her face. "I love you, Jordan. Promise me you won't leave me for Marvin."

"Mason," Jordan corrected.

He smiled. "Whatever."

"I promise. And thank you, Three, for trusting that I wouldn't have anything to do with any other guy."

He smiled and opened her door for her. "If I didn't trust you, our relationship wouldn't be as strong as it is. Of course I trust you."

They headed out to go to breakfast, but when Jordan yawned, Eric remembered his promise and pulled into a gas station and headed into the store. The place was busy and he had to wait in line to buy her an "Instead," an all-natural morning smoothie/energy drink. As he waited, the scandal mags in front of the counter caught his eye and he froze.

He heaved a heavy sigh, moved forward and grabbed the paper. Looking closely at the pics and headline, he shook his head. Finally he laid the paper and the smoothie on the counter, paid and hurried out. He climbed into the car and glanced at Jordan. He hated to ruin her day, but he thought she had the right to know.

She smiled at him. "What's wrong?"

"Okay, so, you know how our family is used to things being written or reported about us, right?"

"Yes."

"Sooo, don't let this bother you, okay?"

Her brow furrowed. "Uh, okay."

He started to hand her the magazine, but held onto it a moment. "Really, this is just evidence that you are now officially one of us."

"Good grief, now I'm scared to look at it. Is it about *me*?"

He handed her the magazine. The headline read, *"Eric Kino's Girlfriend—More than a Professional Relationship with her Bodyguard. And He's Not the*

Only One."

Jordan gasped. Her eyes immediately filled. She could barely focus on the pictures. The largest one was one of her hugging Agent Trout and kissing him on the cheek. But there was more. There was one taken through the window of the coffee shop of her and Mason having coffee together. And another one of Logan hugging her by her car. And another one of Mason holding her hand outside the sports complex. And another one of her and Eric outside her apartment.

She read every lying word in the article through her tears as Eric sat beside her, being very quiet and very calm.

Finally, she finished and looked up at Eric. "They think I'm having multiple affairs. One of them with Logan."

He nodded. "They don't think that. They just make stuff up to go with the pictures. That's just what they do."

She shook her head. "But how? How did they get those pictures?"

"Remember that girl you pointed out to me just yesterday? It was probably her. You said you saw her outside the apartment, right?"

She nodded. "So that means that people know where I live."

"Yes. But that's not all. So, these pics are of you from a several days ago, but you saw her at the memorial yesterday, so, there's probably more to come that couldn't make this edition."

"Ugh, I can't stand this."

"Sure you can. Don't let this little thing get to you, Jordan. It's always gonna be part of our lives. It's been a part of mine as long as I can remember. I deal with it. It doesn't change who I am and it doesn't change what I do. I don't pay them much attention. The only time we Kinos have anything to do with the media is when we can use them to help others. We don't put any credence in what they have to say. Especially in these types of mags, where they print ridiculous stories. Don't let it bother you, baby. Please."

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one being accused of having affairs with four different guys."

He shrugged. "No, but they've said other things about me, like earlier this year they said I flunked out of college."

"Really?"

"Yes. And I don't like to be thought of as stupid, so I admit, it hurt. For a minute. But, really, who cares? Jordan, I love you. And I don't want this kind of thing to scare you away from me. Please. You've been really cool about accepting the good part that comes with being with a family in the limelight. Will you roll with the punches?"

She sighed. "The alternative would be what? To separate myself from you? Well, that would kill me. So, I guess I'll take it in stride."

He nodded with a smile. "Oh thank goodness. Because I can't stand the thought of losing you and then having to tell that Mason guy that he wins."

Jordan laughed. "No. If I don't get to have you, I don't want anyone. Because you have ruined me for anyone else."

"And you have ruined me. So, you know what that means?"

"What?"

"We're stuck with each other."

She smiled, but then frowned. "Three, will you hold me a minute? Just for a minute, and let me get rid of this bad feeling in the pit of my stomach?"

Eric leaned across the console and hugged her. He held her close and whispered in her ear. "This will all go away. The public is fickle. The media will find another interesting person. None of this matters. What matters is you and me and the fact that I am absolutely in love with you, Jordan. Absolutely and completely." He whispered a quick prayer.

She sighed.

Eric started the car and they went to breakfast. He'd chosen a small diner on the corner of a small side street. Another hole-in-the-wall place run by a set of twin sisters, called *Two Sisters.* Jordan got the idea that these people were one of the restaurants Eric's dad had launched into business. The diner only served breakfast and lunch. The atmosphere was bright and sunny and the food was delicious. Nothing gourmet or special. Just regular, all natural, homemade breakfast foods that one might make at home, only they didn't want to cook it themselves.

The food did a lot to make Jordan feel better, but it was the owners themselves who helped the most.

"Oh, young Eric! We're so happy to see you. It's been a while. And here you brought us your girlfriend. That is wonderful! We're so happy that you've brought her in to meet us."

"That's right," the second sister chimed in. "So, I guess that means this is really serious!"

Jordan smiled.

"And that means none of that stuff that's printed about you is true," the first sister said softly. She leaned down. "Don't you pay a bit of attention to stuff like that, honey. If all that were true Eric wouldn't have anything to do with you. And here you are, together, obviously happy and in love."

"Am I that obvious?" young Eric asked.

"Yes you are," the sisters said at the same time.

"So, everyone will understand that as soon as they see pictures or video of you two together, they'll know that the both of you are totally in love—with each other."

Eric grinned at them. "Yeah we are."

After breakfast, they were the last to arrive at the game. Jordan wondered if anyone else in the family knew yet about the pictures. She found out as soon as they got to their seats.

Young Eric's mom came over and knelt down to her. "Don't you pay a bit of attention to that garbage. I have some clout and I will have them print a retraction. They have messed with the wrong people."

Jordan smiled at Mrs. Kino. She'd never seen this fierce side of her. It was quite attractive.

Logan came over and put his arm around her. “Hey, babe, I thought we might as well play it up,” he said with a laugh. He kissed her cheek with young Eric looking on. She pushed him away with a laugh.

“Don’t let it bother you,” Logan admonished.

“Will this mess you up with trying to ask out Melody?”

“If it does, then it wasn’t meant to be. We’ll see.”

Jordan nodded.

“Let’s just watch the game,” young Eric said. “JoJo needs to concentrate and do well, so we have to help him as the twelfth man.”

Jordan quickly nodded her head, stood up and let loose an ear-splitting whistle. “Woo hoo, JoJo, kill it baby!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Young Eric grinned.

✝✝✝

Psalm 120:2

“Save me, Lord, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues.”

Chapter Seven

October 27th, Sunday Evening
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jordan looked around at the giant group of people. This amazing family just never stopped. It had now been two months. Two months since Jordan's life had significantly changed.

Two months ago she'd had a flat tire and broken down on the highway and been rescued by the amazing guy standing across the room. Two months ago she'd attended another family birthday party, one for Mrs. Kino and her daughter, Taylor. Today's party for the grand matriarch of this bunch of super people, Shelley Kino. She was turning sixty-five.

Apparently, her eldest son, Mark Adams also had a birthday this week, in two days, but he had insisted that this party only be about his mother. He'd said his own family, Bella, JoJo, Logan and Em, along with his brother Joey and his family, Breez, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger, were gonna do a big celebration by going family bowling and pigging out on pizza. It was enough, he'd said. But Jordan learned that he'd been inundated with gifts from the entire Kino clan, because it was a special time, his fortieth birthday. They couldn't let that pass.

Jordan shook her head. The family was always thinking about others. Always. They'd been so kind to invite Jordan's own family to church today and to this party. They'd also included Alec and Desi. Jordan had learned that the two had been presented with a home by the end of the coming week and would have a car by tomorrow.

The Kino family did everything so fast. 'No time like the present,' was their motto, though it was always attributed to Grandmaster Kino. Things did happen quickly around here. Just one week after meeting Three, he'd taken her to JoJo's game with him and asked her to be his girlfriend. Just one week. And that seemed like forever ago instead of two months. And just a week ago, Eric had been in Mexico, being beaten and held and then *less* than a week ago, he'd fought seven men and killed five of them. Then the very next day he'd gone to meet Nick Sutter at the gas station, and found Alec and Desi. Three days later he'd attended the memorial, rescued her from an unwanted admirer, taken her to the USC game, which they'd won, started working out again, picked her up early this morning for church, been asked to give his testimony, then came home and helped prepare for this party. He'd recovered from his ordeal in only a week. He seemed to be back to normal. It was like life was in double speed around here.

Jordan smiled as she watched her little sister Josie divide her attentions between playing with the little Kino and Adams kids and smiling at the Davis boys, who were just one and two years older than Josie. The boys were being very kind.

Jordan looked around to see where Jamie was, and found him sitting on the floor, his face turned up to the older guys, Gabe, Alec, JoJo and Logan, listening intently to whatever they were chatting about. Looked like a bit of hero worship goin' on. Then she realized young Eric wasn't in that group and wondered where he'd gotten off to. She found out a few seconds later when his strong arms circled her waist from behind.

"Hello, there, Two-Three," he murmured against her cheek. "Are you having a good time?"

"Hey, Three. I am. Your grandmother, she must be the sweetest person I've ever known."

"She's the best. And you should hear the stories of the things she did and things that happened to her when Granddad first met her."

"Tell me one of the stories."

"Hmm, something sweet, something funny, or something bad?"

"Umm, tell me something sweet."

"Okay, well, let me think." He nuzzled her neck while he thought, then stopped and rested his chin on her shoulder. "So, she got arrested once, and..."

"That doesn't sound very sweet, Three."

"Just wait, you'll see."

"How in the world did your sweet grandmother get arrested?"

"Some deranged woman shot Aunt Angel and was trying to kill Grandma and they fought and my grandmother got the gun away from her, but then the police finally arrived and they arrested Grandma because she was the one holding the gun."

He paused and Jordan turned to look up at him. "Still not sweet."

He brushed some hair back from her face and smiled. "You're so impatient. I'm telling a story here."

She giggled. "Sorry, go ahead."

"So they put her into a jail cell with a bunch of other women, most of them hookers. They are a really rough, hardened bunch of women, and one of them tries to pick a fight with Grandma, but she starts talking to them, like, asking them about their lives and how they ended up in a jail cell in New Orleans."

"What were they doing in New Orleans?"

"It was a martial arts tournament."

"Oh. Okay, go on."

"So, these women, start talking about their families and their lives and the constant danger they're in and their hopes and fears. And by the time Granddad and Uncle Justin and Uncle Jason are able to arrange her release, she'd worked a miracle. The officer said he'd never seen anything like it. The women had all memorized Grandma's phone number and promised to keep in touch and wanted to turn their lives around."

"Awww, that IS sweet."

"Yeah, and then she'd also saved Aunt Angel's life and knew she was in the hospital all alone with no family and friends to visit her, so Grandma insisted that Granddad take her to the hospital to visit Aunt Angel and Granddad told her it was after visiting hours and they wouldn't let her in and my grandma came up with some crazy elaborate plan to sneak in and it worked and Grandma and Uncle Jason, who was just starting to like Aunt Angel, snuck into her room and let her know she was not alone."

"Okay, that really is sweet."

"Yep, just like you."

"Not hardly. Tell me something funny now, about your grandma."

"Hmm, okay, let me pick one. Oh, I know, so, when Granddad was first starting to train Grandma for the MART, she was really stiff and sore, like, just the second day. So, Granddad surprised her with a masseuse to give her a rub down and help loosen her up. The guy was this big, burly dude who spoke in a thick French accent. And when he got his hands up near Grandma's backside, she went a little crazy. She tried to get away and he tried to hold her down and she screamed. And Granddad came running in to see what was going on and the French dude was fussing and talking about how 'eeensuulted' he was. He said, 'I am a pro-fess- sheenaal.' "

"That's not that funny. I wouldn't want some strange man's hands all over me either."

"Good to know," young Eric said with a smile. "The funny part was since then, Grandma gets irritated if anyone speaks French to her, or even does a French accent."

Jordan giggled. "You'll have to demonstrate sometime tonight."

He nodded. "I will."

"Tell me something bad."

"There's lots of those. Let me see, a short one. Hmm, none of them are really short, but I'll just tell you this. When Granddad was a senior in high school he beat up some dude that was always picking on the Asian students. And then the guy that got beat up, he lost his girlfriend to Granddad, and then Granddad married her."

"But I thought your grandmother didn't marry your grandfather until she was like, thirty."

"That's right. I'm getting to it. Granddad's first wife was Ann. She's my father's mother. She passed away when my dad was just eleven years old."

"Oh, yeah, right, I think you told me that before. Sorry, I forgot."

"It's okay. It's hard to keep things straight in our family. Anyway, so, when Granddad met my grandmother and fell in love with her, that guy, the one he'd beaten up in high school took his revenge and he broke into Grandma's house early one morning when she was all alone and beat her up really bad. He almost killed her. Her teeth were loose and her mouth was so swollen that she couldn't eat solid food."

Jordan shook her head. "That is terrible. Oh my gosh, Three, how could a

man do that to your tiny little grandmother."

"It was bad. And it wasn't the last time he came after her. But we'll save that for another day."

"Did the man get caught? Did he go to jail?"

"Granddad knew immediately who did it and he told the police but they weren't buying it and they couldn't question him because he was hiding out."

"So, whatever happened to him?"

"He died."

"Really? How?"

"My grandfather killed him."

Jordan's mouth fell open. "I was not expecting that."

Young Eric nodded. "I know. It surprised me too. It wasn't like he killed him for revenge. It was justifiable homicide. But again, long story to tell you another day."

"Okay everyone," Bree announced loudly. "We're gonna do this at the table, so everyone come into the dining room to sing to Mom."

Shelley Kino was escorted in by her husband and seated at the end of the table closest to the kitchen, while everyone else gathered around the table. The giant chocolate sheet cake lay in front of Shelley with an equally giant 65 on the cake and the words, "Just Getting Started" in bright white.

Sixty-five candles on the cake lit up the room and made Shelley's face glow. They sang to her and asked her to ask for a blessing which was the equivalent of 'make a wish.' She closed her eyes briefly and blew out the candles while everyone cheered.

Bree and Breez, Jewell, Bella and Taylor helped hand out plates of cake, which were then taken over to Ricky who was dishing out a scoop of ice cream either onto or beside the cake. The little ones were taken into the kitchen to sit around the kitchen table. Young Eric grabbed up a couple of plates of cake, stopped by to get them loaded with ice cream and headed to the dining table to sit with Jordan.

"I'd better enjoy this and appreciate it, because I start back training tomorrow and have only ten training days left," young Eric said.

"Are you getting excited?" Jordan asked.

"Not sure if excited is the word for it. Feeling ready. Feeling focused."

"He's feeling jacked," Gabe said as he and Taylor joined them.

Young Eric nodded. "Exactly. And how are you feelin', Gabe?"

"Same."

"Dad says that you are becoming a beast."

"I am, man. I'm ready to kick some booty. You will too," Gabe said. "You have a look in your eye."

"Yeah, it's a look I wouldn't want to see comin' from the guy I'm about to fight," JoJo said as he and Logan took a seat.

Young Eric nodded with a smile.

"So," Mark began, as he came to sit to eat his cake and ice cream. "You guys feelin' pretty good?"

Both Gabe and young Eric nodded. "Yes, sir."

"No worries, no doubts?" Joey asked as he joined them.

"None," Gabe said.

"Don't get cocky," Bree said as she and Ricky came to sit at the table.

"That's not being cocky," Joey answered his sister with a smile. "That's confidence, and it's a good thing."

Everyone looked over at Grandmaster Kino where he sat next to his wife. He smiled and nodded. "Totally agree. We're at the place in training where there should be confidence, a knowing, that you can handle whatever comes. I'm proud of both of these young men and I too am quite confident."

"Will the training change in some way?" Jordan asked. When everyone looked at her, she explained her question. "I mean, now that you're so close to the Challenge, do you let up or push harder or maintain?"

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "That's a great question, Jordan and the answer varies depending on how long they've had to train. Young Eric had ten weeks to train, with a few interruptions. This week he's had off for recovery from his head trauma and the timing was not in a great place. He would have trained really hard this past week, and then we would have tapered off the intensity for these last two weeks. But since he went off cold turkey for a week, it'll be a little different. We'll spend the next two days in hard training, make sure he's good to go, and then start tapering off of the intensity."

"Same for me?" Gabe asked.

"Well, you haven't been at it as long as young Eric so, you'll continue hard this week, and then we'll just keep you warm the next week."

Gabe nodded.

"Will they have any more sparring days?"

"We'll do some light sparring for both of them. Eric will have one more hard sparring day, really only to maintain a confidence level, but that will be an important day. Gabe will spar a few more times, early this week, probably Wednesday, maybe Saturday."

"May I come to see Eric's hard day?"

"Yes, of course. I really like the interest you take in young Eric's training."

"Don't let her fool you, Granddad," Eric said. "She just likes watching me get my butt kicked."

"Wrong," Kimmie said. "She likes it 'cause it's totally hot."

The women all giggled, because it was true.

Jordan looked around at the full table. Grandmaster Kino and his wife, Shelley, Justin and Jason Lee and their wives, Angel and Lori, a pregnant Jeffy and Cam, a pregnant Kimmie and Jensen, Mark and Joey Adams, Mr. and Mrs. Kino, Agent Davis and his pregnant wife, Mickey, and their two sons, Daniel and Jeremy, Jordan's mom and brother and sister, Three and his "brothers," JoJo and Logan, Gabe and Taylor and Alec and pregnant Desi. So many amazing people, and that didn't even include the ones in the kitchen, the Breez and a pregnant Bella, along with nine children, Sophia, Kelstyn, Ledger, Emily, Angelina, Noah, Abraham, Manny and Nate. Jordan used her finger to

go around the table and count.

Young Eric smiled down at her. "Are you counting people?"

She laughed. "Yes. There are so many amazing people here."

He nodded in agreement. "How many did you count?"

"I think someone told me the table seats thirty, and there is one empty chair so, I think twenty-nine in here. Plus two adults and nine children in the kitchen, so that's forty, plus five people are pregnant, so right now, this is a home full of forty-five 'warriors' as Grandmaster Kino calls them."

"Isn't it wonderful?" Shelley Kino said, looking at Jordan. "All these wonderful, amazing warriors here, smiling, laughing, talking, loving each other. Looking at all of their beautiful faces, so filled with light, it's the best birthday gift a person could ask for. I don't need anything else."

"Well, too bad, Mom," Joey said. "Because we have a lot more than that. So, when everyone has eaten and joined us back in the living room, we'll get started opening your presents."

"Yep, but first, Joey and I have to go relieve the ladies from watching the kiddos and let them come in and join you right here," Mark said as he rose.

Joey and Mark cleared their place and headed to the kitchen. Gabe rose to see if he could procure another piece of cake. One by one, the guys all drifted out until the only ones left at the table were all the women. Jordan, Taylor and Desi all moved down the table, closer to the rest of the women and joined in their conversation. It was not dull. Instead, it was delightful, Jordan thought. These women were some of the strongest, brightest people in the world and Jordan was feeling very blessed to be a part of their world.

✞✞✞

October 28th, 1:30 AM, Monday (10 AM Afghan time)

Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Melaynah jumped up quickly when her computer started ringing. Finally. Finally he was calling her. She dashed across the room to her desk and accepted the video call. Jake's face filled the screen and Laynah's eyes immediately filled with tears of gratitude.

"Jake," she cried.

He smiled at her. "Bugs," he said softly. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes! Yes, I can hear you just fine. How are you? Tell me all about what's been happening."

He frowned. "I'd rather talk about you."

"I'm okay. I moved back in to my family's home to help because Mom's on bed rest, which I know I've already told you, but just sayin' I'm still here."

Jake chuckled. "Okay, and how's she doing?"

"Well, she's holding on. Both babies' heartbeats are strong."

"Good. So, tell me what your days are like."

She sighed. "They're full of missing you."

"I miss you too, Bugs. So much."

Laynah squinted and looked closer at the screen. "What's wrong with your face? Are you hurt?"

"Just a little scratched up. Nothing worse than what a certain hellcat did to me earlier this year."

She frowned. "I'm sorry about that Jake. Truly. There was so much pent-up anger and frustration."

"I know babe. I'm not complaining. I'm just teasing."

"Jake, tell me, really now, what happened to your face?"

He sighed. "I, uh, got in a fight."

"With who?"

"With an RPG."

Laynah gasped. "Oh no, how close was it? Was anyone else hurt?"

"Close enough and yes. But I was able to get to Derrick and get him out of there before any further damage could be done."

"Is Derrick okay?"

"He will be. He's being flown to Germany right now."

"How bad is it?"

"Not as bad as it could be. He still has all of his limbs and he'll be able to rejoin the team in about a month maybe."

Laynah sniffed away the tears as she tried to be strong for Jake's sake. "And you weren't hurt?"

"Nope. Just a few scratches."

"What was the mission?"

"Laynah, you know I can't talk about that."

"Well, you were trying to help someone, right? Did you find the person? Did you succeed?"

"Persons. And yes, we were able to get them out. And that's all I can say." He sighed. "So, are you still taking care of the horses every morning?"

"Yes. I take care of the horses, then come in and make breakfast for the kids and mom, then clean up the kitchen and plan what I'm gonna make for dinner. I help mom with some physical therapy and help her get clean and I hug her a lot, because she's been kind of weepy. And your mom comes over pretty much every other day and helps her."

"Only every other day," Jake said with a chuckle.

"Yes, because the days she's not here, she's at the Tanners' seeing if Lizzy needs anything. Your mom is a total jewel and she's the best friend anyone could ever have."

"I know. I've always been amazed by her. Hey, Bugs, we're being summoned, so I have to go."

"Oh, so soon? When will you call me again?"

"I'll try again tomorrow, depending on what mission we're about to get. I love you, baby. I miss you so much. You keep being strong for me, okay?"

Laynah nodded and offered a smile. "I got this, Jake. You stay safe. Do you hear me? Stay safe."

He nodded. "I will, Bugs. I love you."

"I love you." She sniffed. "I love you so much."

"Ditto. Talk to you tomorrow night. Get some sleep."

"I will. See you soon."

"See you soon."

The screen went blank. Laynah sat there, staring at her own reflection for a few minutes.

"That was Jake?"

She looked up at her father standing in her doorway. "Yes. Finally. But we only got to talk for a few minutes and then he had to go," she complained.

Chaz nodded. "How's he doing?"

"Well, his face was all scratched up from getting into a fight with an RPG, he said."

Chaz' brows rose. "Well, if he's still standing after that then he's blessed."

Laynah nodded. "I guess I need to thank God for that."

Chaz agreed. "Well, try to get some sleep, sweetheart. I can't afford you gettin' sick."

Laynah nodded.

"And hon, if I haven't said it lately, I can't tell you how grateful I am for your help. I don't know what we'd do if you weren't here."

"You're welcome, Dad. I'm glad I can help. Really. Truly grateful I'm here to take care of my family."

Chaz smiled. "You're a good girl, Bugs."

✞✞✞

October 28th, 8:13 PM, Monday Evening

UCLA Off Campus Housing, Los Angeles, California

Sighing heavily, Jordan closed her laptop and her notebook and her two other books. That was it. That's all she could do tonight. Her mind was tired and she couldn't force herself to do any more studying. She pushed away from the small desk in the bedroom she shared with Colton and began laying out clothes and packing her sports bag for the next day. She'd had a great practice this morning. All three coaches had complimented her. She'd struck out six girls during their scrimmage. She was feeling really good about it.

She'd gotten to all of her classes without problems. She had an early dinner at the cafeteria. Three had called her after dinner to let her know that his training went better than anyone thought and that he'd sparred well against a couple of 5th Dans and that he felt more confident than ever. So far, the day was a good day.

Heading out into the kitchen to put the clothes she'd washed into the dryer, she checked to see if Jackie was home yet. She was not. Jordan looked over Jackie's room. It was a huge mess. It always was. She had so many nice things, clothes, shoes, purses, jackets, hats, bedspread, furniture, but you couldn't tell it because it was always in complete disarray.

Jordan went into the tiny kitchen and put her clothes in the dryer. At least they had a washer and dryer and didn't have to go to a laundromat to wash their clothes. She thought about gathering up Jackie's clothes and throwing them in the wash, but decided she didn't have the energy. She'd already washed Colton's practice clothes with hers knowing she would need them in

the morning.

Jordan didn't know where Jackie was, but she knew Colton was out on a date with a new guy, the one she'd asked to go to the concert with her next month. Jordan started the dryer and then checked the fridge again to see if anything new had magically appeared since the last time she'd looked in there. Nope. Sighing, she decided she'd go out and grab a little something. But she couldn't leave the kitchen in a mess like this, she thought.

So, she did up the dishes in the sink. Grabbed some water bottles from the case on the floor and put them in the fridge and pulled the bag of trash from the trash can, tied it off and placed it near the door. Jordan figured as long as she was making a trip to the dumpster, she might as well gather all the trash she could gather, so she went back to the kitchen and pulled out two more trash bags. One she placed inside the empty trash can. The other she opened and went around the entire apartment gathering trash from the overflowing small bathroom trash can to the small ones in their bedrooms and all the fast food bags in the living room and in Jackie's room.

She went to her room, grabbed her license and debit card out of her wallet and shoved them in her hip pocket along with her phone, grabbed her keys and put them in her front pocket to free up her hands and headed out with her bag of trash, lifting the one already by the front door, turning the lock on the door before she closed it, and kicking the door shut since she had a bag of trash in each hand.

Walking across the small gravel parking lot, she passed her car and went to the edge of the lot where some hedges separated the trash dumpster in an effort to relieve the eyesore. On the other side of the hedges, the dumpster sat on a concrete pad that was surrounded by coarse white granite gravel and then the small side street that the trash trucks used to access the dumpsters behind the properties lining the road. The little side street wasn't much bigger than an alley and was used as a shortcut by students and used by neighboring children for scooters and skateboards.

Rather than go around the hedges to the dumpster, Jordan squeezed between two of the hedges, which wasn't difficult to do because so many people did it, the space had become larger. She circled around to the front of the dumpster where the top was open. She saw a guy coming down the alleyway at a brisk pace, and thought nothing of it. Turning, she tossed first one bag and then the other into the dumpster. She turned back and the guy was right there, looking straight ahead as if he didn't even see her.

She started to head back when the guy suddenly stopped and looked at her. She nodded. "Hello," she murmured.

He didn't answer. He simply charged at her, grabbing her, pushing her backward and slammed her against the metal dumpster.

The back of her head snapped back against the metal, stunning her. She would have fallen down but he was holding her up with his forearm pressed against her throat.

She couldn't understand what was happening, or why it was happening.

What she could understand, was that she couldn't breathe. She clawed at his arm, trying to get him to release his hold so she could draw a breath. But he looked her right in the eye as he pushed his arm against her. She started to black out, and began slipping down.

When that happened he released his arm and allowed her to slide down to land on the concrete pad. She was dazed and terrified and confused. She struggled to catch her breath so that she could stand and run. But his hands pushed up her shirt, clawed at her abdomen and grabbed the waistband of her jeans. Using the waistband like a handle, he jerked her over, pulling her away from the dumpster, across the concrete pavement and halfway out onto the large, sharp, gravel rocks.

He bent over her, straddling her body and worked on unbuttoning her jeans. Jordan came to her senses enough to realize what was happening. She raised her knee and kicked to the groin as hard as she could. He grunted and fell on top of her and rolled away. Jordan immediately turned over, got to her feet and started to run, but he reached out quickly and grabbed her by the foot and jerked back on it.

She went face down on the concrete, smacking her forehead and her nose and chin. Again, she was stunned. He stood, keeping hold of her foot and dragged her back, scraping her face and abdomen and arms and right knee across the concrete and rocks. She began kicking the left foot that he held, trying to remove it from his grip, but he grabbed on with the other hand and twisted hard. Crying out when she felt something pop, she rolled over to keep him from tearing her foot off. He dragged her farther away from the dumpster, she guessed to give himself more room and reached down again to unbutton her jeans which he finally accomplished, and then ripped the zipper apart, tearing the jeans down to the inseam. Jordan was sobbing now, as she tried to kick him. Her left leg was throbbing in pain, so she kicked out with her right leg, but he sat on her, straddling her waist, leaned forward and put his hands around her throat and squeezed.

She tried desperately to pull his hands away, but he was too strong. She clawed his arms, but he continued to squeeze and she knew she was losing consciousness. All she could think about was how much she loved Three, and her family, and his family, and she was about to learn firsthand all about Jesus.

"Not yet."

Jordan opened her eyes at the words but didn't see anyone. Then, she heard laughter. Girls and guys. Laughing and talking. A group of kids were coming down toward the dumpster. Suddenly, the guy let go of her throat and ran down the alleyway. She lifted her head to see him run and when he disappeared from view she lowered her head. She tried to call out, but couldn't make a sound. All she could think about was, get up. Get up and get into the car. It's right there. Get to it. She reached for her front pocket, but it wasn't there. Sitting up, she realized it was only folded back because he'd torn her jeans. She reached the pocket, found the keys, pulled them out.

Rolling over onto her stomach, she got her right knee up under her and

forced herself to stand. She tried to put some weight on her left foot. It was excruciating, but she fought her way through the pain and hopped on one foot over to her car, opened the door and collapsed into the front seat. She knew she wasn't breathing right. Her breaths were coming in tiny little gasps. She couldn't understand why. Putting the keys into the ignition, she started the car and pulled away. That's all she could do. Drive away, she thought. Just drive. She had no idea where she was going. She had no idea what she was doing. She was trying to make herself breathe. At the moment, that seemed to be the most important thing to do.

✝✝✝

Young Eric picked up his phone when it buzzed. "Hey Dad, since I just said 'goodnight' to you, I guess you forgot to tell me something?"

"Nope, I didn't forget to tell you anything, but I guess you forgot that Jordan was coming over?"

"Uh, no. Why do you say that?"

"Well, I guess she decided to surprise you, because the gate just called to tell me that Jordan has just arrived."

"Strange. Okay, thanks. I'm headed down."

Eric pulled his jeans back on and headed downstairs to the front door and opened it. Jordan was just pulling up. The car came to a stop and he stood at the door waiting for her to get out. When she didn't, he headed down the front steps, circled around the front of her car and tried to open her door. It was locked. He knocked on the window. "Jordan, unlock the door."

Nothing. He bent down and peered in. She had her hands frozen on the steering wheel and she was staring straight ahead. He frowned and knocked again. "Jordan, unlock the door," he said louder. Finally, he heard the click and immediately opened her door. She turned her head slightly to look at him.

"Oh, dear Jesus," he uttered softly. "Baby, what happened?"

She blinked, staring straight at him, but not seeing him.

Her face was covered in blood. A big red spot on her forehead and one on her cheek oozed blood. Her nose was also bleeding. And her mouth. Her hair was a tangled mess.

The seatbelt alarm was going off and he realized the car was still in gear. He reached in and put it in park, turned off the ignition, and pocketed the keys. Then he scooped her up into his arms, careful to support her head and neck and hurried inside.

"Dad! Mom!" he yelled as he carried her toward the stairs.

They came running. Young Eric took Jordan up into the room she usually used and laid her on the bed, his parents right behind him.

He moved out of the way and let them see her.

What they saw was unbelievable. Her face was bloody, so bloody they couldn't tell where all the blood was coming from. She had claw marks on her throat. Her jeans were ripped apart from the bottom of the zipper down to the crotch. There were more claw marks on her abdomen and there was road rash also on her abdomen and on the underside of her forearms. Her jeans were also

torn on the right knee and her knee was scraped and bloody.

She wore only her right shoe, and the exposed foot on the left leg was hugely swollen. Bree moved close, looking her over. “I can’t fix this. She needs a doctor. We need to take her to the hospital.”

She started shaking her head violently. “No,” she croaked. “Please don’t send me away,” she whispered as tears ran over her cheeks.

Bree looked up at Ricky. Ricky nodded. “Call Jeffy.”

Both his parents moved away for a minute. Young Eric sat down on the side of the bed and leaned close. “Baby, can you tell me what happened?”

“A guy. A guy,” she whispered.

“Where was this guy?”

“Dumpster,” she got out.

“At the trash dumpster? At your apartment?”

She nodded slightly. Her breaths were coming in short, tiny little gasps.

“Can you take a deep breath, Jordan?”

She tried but started coughing.

“Okay, okay. Sweetheart, I think we need to get you to a hospital.”

She started wailing.

“Okay, okay. Shhh, it’s okay.”

“What happened?” Taylor said as she came into the room. She looked down at Jordan. “Oh no,” she cried when she saw her. “Jordan, what happened?”

Jordan closed her eyes as her body began shaking. “A guy.”

“Jordan, this guy, he attacked you when you took out the trash?”

She nodded slightly.

“Did you know him?”

She shook her head.

Ricky came back into the room. “Your mom is on the phone with Jeffy. She’s on the way.”

“Dad, Jordan went to take the trash to the dumpster behind her apartment and some guy jumped her. Can Jason get the police over there and see if there’s a camera nearby?”

Ricky nodded and stepped back out into the hall to call Jason.

Bree came back into the room. “Okay, Jeffy and Cam are on the way. Taylor, get me another blanket out of that closet, please.”

Taylor did so immediately and they covered Jordan.

“I’ll get some hot water and a cloth,” Taylor said.

“No,” young Eric said. “They’ll have to collect DNA samples and we have to take pictures first. We have to show the damage that was done.”

“Then I’ll get my phone,” Taylor said quickly.

Jordan sniffed. “Three,” she whispered.

He bent his head down to her. “What is it, baby?”

“Will– you– lay– with me?”

“Yes, of course.” He scooted in next to her and she immediately turned toward him and nestled her head under his chin. The shaking stopped and she relaxed. He stroked his hand over the back of her head and down her back, but

when he repeated the motion he came across a huge lump on the back of her head. He sighed, closed his eyes and prayed.

Fifteen minutes later Jeffy arrived, accompanied by her husband. When she walked into the room, young Eric immediately got up off the bed.

He nodded. "Cam, Aunt Jeffy, thanks for coming."

"No worries," Jeffy said sweetly as she immediately went to the side of the bed and pulled the cover away from Jordan so that she could see her entire body. Jordan gave a soft moan and so did Jeffy.

Jeffy placed her hand on Jordan's head, shook her head and immediately tears formed. "Oh, sweet girl," Jeffy whispered. "You fought so hard. Oh," she paused, caught her breath. "Oh, the force of this evil, oh my goodness, it's a demon. He's possessed by a demon."

Jordan's eyes blinked open. "Dr. Kino?" she whispered.

"Yes, sweetie. I'm here. Don't worry. You're safe."

"Where's Three? Did he leave?" she croaked.

"I'm right here, babe," Eric said quickly and moved closer to the other side of the bed.

"Be quiet now, Jordan, and let me assess your injuries, okay?"

Jordan closed her eyes again. Sighed.

Jeffy touched Jordan's throat, her chest, her abdomen, both legs and then her foot. Finally she went back to the head of the bed and placed her hand on Jordan's bloody cheek. "Sweetie," she said softly. "Open your eyes and listen to me, okay?"

Jordan opened her eyes.

"I need to get you to a hospital."

Jordan's eyes immediately filled and spilled over.

"I know how you feel. But listen, sweetie, I need imaging of your head and the blood vessels and structures in your neck. He strangled you, didn't he?"

She sniffed and nodded.

"I need to be absolutely sure there's no damage to the trachea and you have trauma to your forehead and also on the back of your head. And sweetheart, your foot is broken and your ankle is broken and I need to make sure the bones are set properly and cast. And with all the scrapes and cuts, one of the biggest threats is infection."

"Please let me stay here. Please."

Jeffy sighed. "Cam, hand me my bag please."

Cam placed her bag on the side of the bed. Jeffy took out a stethoscope and listened to Jordan's heart. Took her blood pressure.

"Jordan, can you take a deep breath for me?"

Jordan shook her head.

Jeffy placed her hands on Jordan's chest. "Breathe in, in, in. Good. Now blow it out. Do it again. Good girl." She took the stethoscope and moved down and placed it on Jordan's ankle and listened for a quick pedal pulse/capillary refill. She moved back to the head of the bed. "Jordan, I need to get the bones in your foot and ankle set properly. There is a possibility of vascular injury. Do

you understand, sweetie?"

Jordan nodded.

"I'll make you a deal. I will stay right there with you. Three will know where you are. And the moment it is medically safe, I will bring you right back here. Let me get you to a hospital, we'll run scans, we'll get your foot taken care of, we'll clean up the wounds and then bring you back here. You may not even have to spend the night." She glanced at Cam, "What time is it?"

"It's 9:52."

"I'll get the hospital to work fast and I'll have you back here as quickly as possible," Jeffy continued. "Please, sweetie. Let me help you."

Jordan sniffed and nodded.

Jeffy turned immediately to Cam. "We'll transport her. I'll ride in the back seat with her."

"Will you come with me, Three?" Jordan whispered.

"Jordan, they're gonna be working on you so quickly, he'll just be in the way," Jeffy said.

"And I have some business to take care of while you're gone," young Eric said softly. "But Jeffy will take such good care of you, you won't even know I'm not there."

She whimpered. "Yes I will."

Eric looked to Jeffy. "What's wrong with her? This isn't like her at all."

"She's in shock, but actually it's more dangerous than that. She appears to be in acute traumatic distress and may be dissociating. But the memory loss could also be from the blows to her head or from lack of oxygen when she was strangled, or both." Jeffy leaned over the bed. "Jordan, how did you get here?"

Jordan shook her head.

"Do you remember driving here?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you," young Eric said, his voice in a panic.

"No, I don't remember driving here. In my car?"

"Yes, in your car," Eric answered softly.

"You see? This is serious, and her blood pressure is low. She has two pretty serious bumps to the head, and we could be looking at brain injury. I really need to get her stabilized. Cam, let's get going."

"I'll carry her out," Eric said.

"Be careful to keep her neck supported, and be careful of her foot. She's not registering pain right now, but it has to be very painful. I guess we're lucky that you didn't cause any harm when you carried her in here."

Eric blinked and nodded. "Oh, wow, sorry Aunt Jeffy. I guess I was a little panicked and wasn't thinking."

"Understood sweetie. Now let's move."

Bree and Taylor and Alec and Desi stood in the hallway, waiting. When Bree heard what Jeffy said she swung into action. "Taylor, look in the uniform closet and get her a t-shirt and put it in your duffel and add a pair of your underwear. I'll get her some of my sweats."

They hurried to get her bag ready as Eric lifted her from the bed and made his way down to Jeffy's SUV. Within minutes Eric stood outside his home and watched Jeffy, Cam and Jordan drive away. He turned and headed back into the house and went to his father who was on the phone, half-sitting/half-standing at the kitchen breakfast bar.

Eric's eyes met his father's. "Anything yet?"

Ricky held up a finger. "Okay, Jason, thanks and keep me posted."

He put his phone down. "Agent Trout is with the LA police and they are headed to the scene. There are cameras there and we are working on getting some footage. We'll know something soon. What did Jeffy have to say?"

"She said Jordan is in shock, blood pressure is low, possible damage to her trachea because he strangled her, her foot is broken in two places, or her foot is broken and her ankle is broken, that's what I see in here. That's what she said as she pointed to her head. Then she also said that Jordan has two head injuries that could be serious."

Bree, Taylor, Alec and Desi came into the kitchen. Ricky looked at their faces and nodded. "Shall we have a prayer?"

They all immediately stood in a circle holding hands while Ricky prayed.

Young Eric looked up. "She's gonna stay here for the foreseeable future," he said firmly. "Is that okay, Mom, Dad?"

"Of course," Bree said quickly.

"I'm going up to her apartment, speak with her roommates and get her things."

"Now?" Bree asked.

"Yes."

"But can't you wait until..."

"Bree," Ricky said quickly.

She stopped. "What?"

"Honey, I know you want to protect your little boy, but he's a man. He feels like he needs to do something. Let him do it."

She nodded. "You're right. Sorry, Eric. You go do what you have to do. But be careful."

Young Eric nodded and headed upstairs to get dressed.

✞✞✞

Exodus 14:14

"The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."

Chapter Eight

Eric tried to pull into the parking lot of Jordan's apartment building but it was blocked off by a line of police. Several young people stood around watching and wondering what was going on as police went about securing a crime scene around the dumpster on the other side of the hedges. Eric drove down the road and parked on the street, walked back to the apartment with a large piece of luggage and knocked on the door.

He saw someone peek through the peephole, and then the door swung open. Eric nodded at Colton.

"Eric, come in."

He stepped inside. Jackie was sitting on the couch. He nodded at her. "Hello, Jackie."

"Eric, do you know what's goin' on? And do you know where Jordan is? She's not answering her phone," Colton asked.

He nodded. "Jordan is on the way to the hospital. She was attacked tonight. Looks like attempted rape. She's pretty messed up."

"Oh, no," Colton cried.

"So, I'm guessing neither one of you were home when it happened?"

"No. We just got home about thirty minutes ago, and right after we did, the police were like, swarming the place."

"So, the cops, they haven't been up to speak to you yet?"

"No," Jackie said.

"Well, I'm sure they will."

"Where did it happen? In the parking lot?" Colton asked.

"She was taking the trash out. Anyway, I'm here to pick up her things."

"What things?"

"Whatever she needs for the next several weeks. That's why I brought the luggage. I'm gonna have her stay at my house so we can take care of her, and I need your help to gather her stuff."

"Yes, of course. Come on back to the room," Colton said.

"How bad is she?" Jackie asked as she joined them in the bedroom.

"Well, she won't need her softball stuff because her foot and ankle are both broken."

"Oh, no, she's gonna be devastated," Colton said.

"Probably, but right now, I'm more concerned with the head injuries and the throat injury."

"Throat?" Jackie asked.

"Yes. The guy tried to strangle her." He pulled out his phone, pulled up the

pics Taylor sent and handed the phone to Colton.

Both girls gasped as they stared at their friend.

"So," Eric said abruptly. "Where do we begin?"

They went to work gathering all of Jordan's things and packing them into the large piece of luggage Eric brought. Then they gathered her toiletries and put them in Jordan's own smaller bag, including her purse with her wallet in it. When they finished young Eric told them if they needed anything to let him know and if they wanted to come visit Jordan, they were welcome to do so. He then took the luggage out to his car and came right back to the parking area.

When he tried to cross and was denied, he told them he wanted to speak with Agent Trout. A minute later, Agent Trout walked up and waved him inside the police line.

"Was there video?" Eric asked immediately.

"Yes, and it's pretty ugly. The good thing is, his face is clear on the video. He's a student at UCLA. They're picking him up now, if he's at the address provided. As it turns out, there have been three other rapes reported over the past three months, which until tonight hadn't been publicly connected. One of them actually took place a little earlier tonight. They're thinking right before he came upon Jordan taking out the trash. Same MO. Strangles them into submission and rapes them. The others weren't as violent as what happened to Jordan, probably because she fought so hard. Anyway, they should be speaking to him any minute."

"So, they'll have him in custody before I can get to him."

Trout's eyebrows shot up. "You just get those thoughts of revenge out of your mind right now, Eric," he said firmly. "I understand how you feel. I really do. But I know that's not how a Kino operates. Do you hear me?"

Eric sighed. Nodded. "Okay, sorry, I lost control for a minute. May I see the crime scene?"

"Yes. Come this way."

He led him to the dumpster area. Jordan's blood was smeared all over the white concrete and white rocks. It turned his stomach. CSIs were still scanning the area, and taking samples from the blood that was on the dumpster.

"Oh, and Jordan's phone was found at the scene. It's cracked up pretty bad. They're gonna take it into evidence for a bit, so, I'd get her a new one if I were you."

Eric nodded. "May I see the video?"

"Yes. Jason will provide you with that. He's probably already sent it to your dad."

"Are the detectives gonna speak with Colton and Jackie?"

"Yes, two of them just headed up to the apartment."

Eric nodded. "I guess I'll head home then."

"Or you can stick around, because they're gonna want to speak to you too and it will save them a trip down to Crystal Cove."

"Oh. Okay, I'll stick around." He sighed, looked around, then back at Agent Trout.

"How would you feel about coming back to watch over Jordan again?"

"I'm a little soft, when it comes to our girl, so I have no problem with that, only, it's not my call. I'm being promoted and Jason and Joey may have other plans for me."

"You're the best and I want the best," young Eric stated.

"Well, the JETTs are the best. I'm only a lead agent."

Eric looked closely at the guy. "So, what is your background? How long have you been at Ameritech?"

"I've been with Ameritech two years. Before that I was with the San Francisco PD. And before that I spent four years in the Army."

"Oh, you were in the military. And so, why are you not a JETT?"

Trout shrugged. "It's not for everybody. And I have a bad knee."

"You do?"

"Nothing big. Just an old injury that causes some pain and lack of movement."

"How did you hurt it? Football?"

Trout gave a short laugh. "Nope. Little bit of lead poisoning. It's not too bad, but enough to keep me humble. Still, I'm really happy to be an agent for Ameritech. They're the best. Fair. Honest. There were people and practices there I couldn't work around anymore. I had to get out of there and Ameritech offered me the perfect solution."

Eric nodded. "Interesting." He smiled. "So, are you still seeing Jordan's English professor?"

He nodded. "So far, but I don't think it's gonna last."

"Why not?"

"She's already making comments about the time I spend on the job. Ameritech is who I am. If she can't handle it, then, it's not gonna work out. But, she's fun to be with. She's interesting. I'll just have to see how it plays out." He nodded behind Eric. "So, here come the detectives. I'll stick around and witness if you want. Keep 'em honest."

Eric nodded. "I'd like that, thanks."

✞✞✞

October 29th, Wee hours Tuesday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

While young Eric waited for Jordan to come back from the hospital, he sat in the den with his father, watching the video. The rest of the family had gone back to bed. Bree didn't want Taylor to see it and escorted her to her room and had a talk with her about what happened to Jordan.

Eric felt sick as he watched his beautiful girl fight for her life. Jeffy said the guy was demon possessed, and watching the video, he had to agree. It was like he was driven by a force so evil and so angry, that nothing would stop him. The way he went after her, it didn't seem to make sense that some kids walking by would make him run away. Even as he had that thought, he realized it was divine intervention. He glanced at his phone. It was after one in the morning. It was taking longer than Jeffy had predicted.

"Son, as soon as they get back, you need to try to get some sleep. Six AM comes fast."

Young Eric glanced at his father and shook his head. "Dad, there's no way. I'm not going to train."

"Yes, you are."

"Dad, are you kidding me? You think I should leave Jordan and go train at a time like this?"

"I do, and I have good reasons, so when you're ready to hear them, you let me know. But you'd better get ready sometime between now and 6:00 AM."

"I am not going to train. And if that means I won't be able to fight in the Challenge, then I won't fight."

Ricky shook his head, heaved a heavy sigh. "I wouldn't figure you for having a knee-jerk reaction."

Young Eric leaned over, rubbing both hands over his face and hair. "I'm listening," he said with a sigh.

"Do you remember when Laynah was raped, and they waited to tell Jake until after the Mini-MART?"

"Yes."

"It's kind of like that. What's happened is over. You can't change what happened to Jordan. There's nowhere to go from here except forward. But opting out of training and/or out of the Challenge is a career killer. Your producers and the studio are depending on you to win the Challenge. I realize it didn't start out that way, but once you agreed to compete, they've played it that way completely. And not only are they depending on you, but so are the other people who did that movie with you, the writers, the director, the other actors, that kid who was doing his first real movie, they are all depending on you. You can make them or break them. You have to think of someone other than yourself."

"I am. I'm thinking of Jordan."

"Are you?"

"What does that mean?"

"Jordan is going to recover from this episode in her life. She is strong. That's evident from the strength she showed trying to fight this guy off. So, once the initial shock wears off, she will recover. And then, she'll realize that you stopped training and therefore aren't prepared to fight in the Challenge. She'll realize that you won't be able to win, and it will all be because of her."

"It's not her fault she was attacked by some crazy."

"No, of course not. But she won't see it that way. She'll think that because she was in your life, you were unable to achieve your dreams. She will blame herself, and that will eventually come between you two. That is too much weight to put on her shoulders right now. She already felt like she was responsible for your kidnapping."

"She did?"

"Yes. She said if you hadn't known her, then you wouldn't have been taken and it was all her fault."

"Well, I hope you set her straight."

"I did. But I'm telling you now, do not let this change what you're seeking to accomplish. You are about to make it big, which means you are about to have the opportunity to be a light to the world, to do some real good, to be a huge influence. You think the dark forces of the world don't know that? They know. And they'll do anything to stop you, including hurting those you love so that you'll give up and quit. Don't quit, son. Don't let the bad guys win. But hey, if you don't want to listen to me, I get it, but at the very least take time to speak with Dad."

Eric's brow furrowed. "Dad, are you saying that you think I'll listen to Granddad, but not to you?"

Ricky shrugged. "Just sayin'."

Young Eric shook his head. "I have just as much respect for you as I do for Granddad. You are both my heroes. Both. And I will listen to you and I don't need to back that up by asking Granddad. I'll be up at six in the morning, and I'll do what I have to do. So don't worry, I won't let the bad guys win."

Ricky smiled and nodded. "Thank you," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

Young Eric smiled. "And don't think I don't know what you just did there."

Ricky chuckled.

Eric picked up his phone when it buzzed. "They're back."

Young Eric opened the door and Cam carried Jordan in the house and took her upstairs and placed her gently in the bed.

They untucked the covers at the foot of the bed and uncovered Jordan's foot so they could elevate it, then covered the rest of her with a sheet and a soft sherpa blanket.

Young Eric looked her over. Her face had been cleaned of blood and had a few stitches up on her hairline covered with a small bandage. The rest of the scrapes on her face had a layer of one of Jeffy's medical-grade honey dressings, a topical treatment she had developed herself as part of her growing line of natural, medically based products. Both arms were bandaged. She wore a Kino Martial Arts T-shirt and he couldn't see her stomach, but thought the scratches there would also be treated with the honey dressing. Even though he couldn't see her right leg, he could tell there was also a bandage on her knee.

Jeffy stood beside him. "We gave her something for pain so she'll sleep for a while. If she wakes and is in pain, you can give her one of these," she said, shaking a bottle of pills. "These are strong. No more than one every four hours. She can take it with water or herbal tea." She held out another bottle of pills. "These are antibiotics and should be taken with food."

Eric nodded. "I'll text all this to Mom, because I won't be here tomorrow."

Jeffy nodded. "Good decision."

"I agree," Cam said.

"So, what did the CT scan show?" Eric asked.

"The scans didn't show vascular or airway damage. There's some swelling, and she has petechiae around her eyes, but nothing that requires surgery. Her blood pressure is back to normal. She's gonna be okay, physically.

Emotionally is another story. Her emotions will be all over the place for a while. Be kind. Be loving. But be firm. Her feelings are gonna be tender and it's a fine line to walk, but we can't let her fall into victimhood."

"I don't know how to do that."

"Talk to Dad," Jeffy said. "And one more thing you can do, young Eric, is to win the freakin' Challenge."

Young Eric grinned. "Aunt Jeffy, I love it when you talk tough."

"I talk tough because I am tough. And so are you. Now get some sleep. My suggestion is you sleep in here with Jordan, because if you don't, you'll just worry the rest of the night."

Eric nodded. "That—you don't have to tell me twice."

Jeffy put her hands on his face. "I love you."

"Love you too, Aunt Jeffy."

She kissed both his cheeks.

Cam offered his hand. "You need anything, Eric, let me know."

Eric smiled. "Are you for hire?"

"He is not. Stop that kind of talk," Jeffy fussed.

Cameron chuckled. "Good night, kid. Offer stands. Come on, Jeffy, let me get you home before you go into early labor."

She sighed. "I am tired."

They left and Eric closed the door. He laid his phone on the night table, took off his jeans to be comfortable and slipped into bed beside her, sliding up close to her side. He didn't dare touch her because there wasn't a clear place on her body where she wasn't injured. He did softly lay a hand on the top of her head though, and asked a blessing upon her. Then closed his eyes and went to sleep.

✝✝✝

October 29th, Early Tuesday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

He woke at 5:30 AM to the sound of Jordan whimpering. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Jordan," he whispered. "It's okay. You're safe."

Her eyes blinked open. "Three?"

"Yes."

She moaned.

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes, my foot, my leg, it's throbbing. It hurts so bad."

He sat up. "Can you sit up, if I support your back?"

She struggled to sit upright.

He handed her a pill. "Take this. Aunt Jeffy says it's for pain. It will help." He reached for the bottle of water while keeping his other hand on her back.

She took the pill and he helped her lie back down.

"Hopefully that will kick in pretty soon."

"Thank you." She sighed. "Am I back at your house?"

"Yes. You don't remember leaving the hospital?"

She shook her head. "Don't remember much of anything except the guy at

the dumpster trying to kill me."

He ran his hand over her hair. "I'm sorry, babe. So sorry."

"I can't figure out why he attacked me."

Young Eric shook his head. "Sometimes they don't need a reason other than they are simply evil."

"The look in his eyes, it was like, this wide-eyed crazy look like, literally, crazy. Like he'd lost his mind."

"He's a psychopath. He's raped several girls there at the college."

She turned slightly, in surprise. "You know who he is?"

"They were able to get video from the cameras at the dumpster. He's a student. They'll learn more later today."

"They who?"

"The police."

"Who called the police?"

"Uh, we did. I mean, Dad called Jason and he got the police and also sent Agent Trout to follow up. Apparently, there have been several college campus rapes in the last few months. The administration kept them quiet, and there may have been even more than we know about. The guy strangles the girls to unconsciousness and then rapes them. Up until last night, he'd never done it where there was a camera. But he wasn't thinking about that when he came up on you. He'd just raped another girl a little earlier just before you were assaulted. Jason thinks the others were planned out and you were, well, you were like—a bonus. But that's what got him caught."

"They caught him?"

"Yes. They took him into custody last night. That's all I know so far. I think they're gonna talk to the other girls, maybe try to get them to ID him, but that may not work."

"Why not?"

"Because Jason says most of the other girls reported he was wearing a mask. Which means your testimony will be vitally important to the case and the cops will probably come talk to you sometime today."

Jordan shivered.

He moved closer to her. "We'll get through this together. You and me and my family and..." He stopped when his phone alarm went off. He sighed. "I have to get moving."

"Where are you going?"

He drew a deep breath. "I have to go train."

"Oh. Yeah. I forgot about that."

"You understand that I have to do this, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"I mean, you know, I have to win?"

"I know it's important to you and that means it's important to me."

"It's important to us, because it will dictate the direction my life will take, and my life includes you, so in essence, I'm fighting for you, for us. I have to succeed. And I will. Because your love makes me strong."

She nodded. "It's your love that made me fight so hard last night. All I could think about was I was never gonna see you again. And I thought, 'guess I'm about to meet Jesus,' and He said, 'Not yet,' and then some people came by and I guess it scared the bad guy away."

"Jesus spoke to you?"

"Yes. I heard Him clearly. He said, 'Not yet.'"

Eric smiled. "Do you realize how beautiful that is? That tells you, Jordan, that Jesus is mindful of YOU. He was with *you*."

"Well, if He was with me, I wish He'd helped me."

"Maybe He did. Maybe the people coming by, the ones that scared him off, maybe they were sent that direction. It wasn't your time to die."

"But why couldn't He have kept it from happening?"

"Well, ya know, God never said we won't face difficulties. He did say He will be with us through those difficulties. The things we face, they make us stronger. But Jesus was there with you, and I find that comforting and beautiful." He sighed. "But, I have to get going."

She nodded. "Uh oh," she said suddenly.

"What?"

"I, uh, have to use the bathroom. How in the world am I gonna do that?"

Eric smiled, got out of bed and went around to her side and grabbed up the crutches Cam had placed there the night before. "Let's get you up and see how you do."

He helped her sit up, and eased her foot off the pillows.

"Now, when you lower your foot down from being elevated, it will probably hurt a bit. And remember, you cannot put any weight on it at all."

She nodded as she slowly eased her foot over the side of the bed. "Yep. It hurts." She grunted in pain.

"Sorry." He helped her stand and got the crutches under her arms. "How does that feel? Steady?"

She nodded. "I think I can do it."

"I'm gonna walk beside you to the bathroom, just to make sure. Remember, Aunt Jeffy said don't put any weight on that foot."

"Okay," she said, already breathing hard from the pain.

She winced a few times, but they finally made it.

He looked into the bathroom. "Are you gonna be able to sit down and get back up?"

She nodded. "Yes, I got it. Thanks."

"I'm gonna go get ready. I'll be back before I leave."

"Thanks, Three."

"I love you, Jordan."

"I love you too."

He stood there as she softly closed the door. Then he turned quickly and headed out to his own room.

"How is she?" Taylor said as she came out of her room.

"She's in pain, but she's still a lot better than when I first saw her last night.

Could you do me a favor?"

"Whatcha need?"

"She's in the bathroom. I just wanna be sure she can stand back up and make it back to bed."

Taylor nodded. "Got it covered," she said as she went into Jordan's room. She knocked on the bathroom door and when Jordan didn't answer, she opened the door.

Jordan stood staring into the mirror, the water running in the sink.

"Jordan?" Taylor said softly.

She turned to look at Taylor. Tears ran down her cheeks. "I-I didn't realize it was so bad. I look like a monster."

"No, the monster is what did this to you. It's gonna heal and you'll be right back to gorgeous," Taylor said.

Jordan shook her head. "I think you have to *be* gorgeous in order to get back to gorgeous."

"Stop," Taylor ordered firmly. "You are beautiful, Jordan, and if you don't know that, then you're just dumb."

Jordan laughed. "Oh, sweet Taylor, you have a way of always making me smile. I love you."

Taylor grinned. "I love you too, sis. I mean, I really do. Now, are you goin' back to bed?"

She nodded.

"Let me help you get settled."

Jordan dried her hands, grabbed the crutches and hobbled back to bed. Taylor arranged the pillows under her foot and then studied the cast. She went to the desk, searched for and found a marker and came back. "I get to be first," she announced. She bent over the foot, drew a heart, then wrote 'To MY big sis—I love you! Taylor Kino,' and then drew a second heart.

Jordan smiled. "I love it."

"Gotta run, I'm late for the beach," Taylor said quickly. "I'm guessing Mom will be up to check on you in a few minutes. Bye, Jordan."

"Have a good day at school," Jordan said as the beautiful sprite disappeared. She wanted desperately to roll onto her side and go back to sleep, but sleeping on her side was not an option with her foot elevated. And taking her foot down was also not an option. So she just closed her eyes. It didn't take long at all for her to become drowsy.

"Jordan?"

She opened her eyes to see Three hovering over her.

"I'm sorry to wake you, baby, but I just wanted to say 'goodbye' before I left for the day."

"I'm glad you did. What time is it?"

"It's 7:20." He bent down and placed a kiss on the right side of her forehead, the only place not covered in scratches or cuts or bruises. "I'll see you sometime between five and six this evening."

Her eyes filled.

"Oh, now, sweetie, it's gonna be okay. You are gonna have lots of visitors to keep you occupied. You won't even notice I'm gone."

She sniffed. "Have a good day."

"I will. Ya know why? Because you're alive, and I'm so grateful. So, listen, my mom will be up in a bit with some breakfast. She already came in earlier, but you were asleep and she didn't want to wake you." He adjusted her covers and smiled at her. "Bye Two-Three."

She frowned. "I guess you can't call me that anymore."

He realized he'd messed up. He sighed. "You might not be able to play right now, but you're still on the team."

"I'm gonna lose my scholarship."

"Not necessarily. Let's look into it. But right now, I gotta go." He kissed her forehead again and left quickly.

✝✝✝

Bree looked up at the sound of someone coming down the steps. "Jordan! What in the world are you doing?" She hurried over to try to help her.

Jordan smiled and took another cautious step down, then lowered her crutches to the next step. "Hey Mrs. Kino. Three told me you were gonna bring some breakfast up to the room and I thought you shouldn't have to do that, so I decided to come down to you instead. I'm thinkin' now that it may not have been such a good idea, but I guess it's too late." She grunted as she made it down the last step.

Bree sighed. "Okay, well, have a seat here at the bar and turn slightly sideways and we'll lift that leg up to rest on this other stool."

She helped her get settled, then went back around to the kitchen. "I'm making you a healthy, healing, smoothie for breakfast. Do you think you can get that down?"

Jordan nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Bree turned the blender on and pulled an insulated cup from the cabinet, then turned and ran up the stairs. She came down a moment later with both antibiotics and painkillers.

Jordan sighed. "So, you had to run upstairs anyway. Silly me."

Bree smiled. "Running upstairs is good for me and no problem." She poured the smoothie into the cup, added a straw and gave her the antibiotics. "These are antibiotics, one of Jeffy's formulations," she explained. "She's developed her own line of medicines and topical treatments, combining her medical training with natural compounds she's studied over the years. She's pretty particular about anything she puts in her own body and anything she puts her name on. Okay—and Eric said he gave you a pain pill about 5:30 this morning. Is that the only one you've taken?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"So, you can have another one in thirty minutes if you need it. How is the pain level right now? One to ten?"

"It's about a six, I guess."

"Okay, then, we'll definitely give you one in thirty minutes."

Jordan nodded.

Bree smiled, reached across the counter and brushed some of her hair back. "It would probably help the pain if you wouldn't move around too much, ya know, like, go up and down stairs."

Jordan grimaced at the soft reprimand and nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry."

"How's the smoothie?"

"It's delicious. It tastes more like a milkshake than a smoothie."

"Good. Drink it down, and then we'll get you cleaned up and settled."

"I guess I can't take a shower."

"Well, not yet. Jeffy wants the dressings kept dry for now. Once she clears you, we'll get it done."

"But what about the cast? Do I have to wait until the cast comes off?"

"No, there's a bag that goes over the cast, when you are finally able to take a shower. But for now, I'll help you. I won't invade your privacy. I'll get you some soap and water and towels and help you if you need it."

"I'm not really very shy about my body. I mean, I shower and dress in a locker room full of girls all the time. We don't think too much about it. And I don't want to get all smelly, because like, I mean, I don't want Three to see me that way."

Bree smiled. "I understand. I've been married to Ricky for twenty-two years and I feel the same way. And it's good to be as presentable as possible for our men. Even though they say they don't mind, like when I've been working out and I'm all sweaty, or when we go camping. But still, it's important how we feel about ourselves too, as long as we don't get all caught up in appearances."

Jordan smiled. "That is a cool thing for a woman to say who is thought of as one of the most beautiful people in the world."

Bree shook her head. "Isn't that silly? It's just because of the movies. They can make you look gorgeous even though you're just a regular person."

"Mrs. Kino, you are not just a regular person."

"That's sweet, Jordan, but actually— I am. Now, finish your smoothie."

Jordan took several long draws on her straw. "Are we the only ones here?" Jordan asked.

"Yes. Ricky went to help train the boys. Taylor is at school, and Desi and Alec have driven away in their new car to do some shopping."

"What you guys are doing for them, it's so beautiful," Jordan said.

Bree brushed it away. "We try to help whomever God puts in our path. And they are such sweet kids. As a matter of fact, I have an appointment with Alec's mother this afternoon."

"You do? Wow, that's uh, like, brave I guess. I mean, what are you gonna tell her?"

"I'm going to give her a report on how her son is doing and let her know what a good young man I think he is, and maybe teach her a bit about how she could have better handled everything, that is if God works the conversation around to it. It's not my place to judge, but if I can open her eyes a little, well,

that's up to God."

"I'd be nervous to go and confront someone like that."

"Oh, I'm not gonna confront her. I'll simply tell her about Alec and the new plans for his life and maybe help her to reach out to him. And then she'll feel at ease that he's gonna be okay, and maybe she'll feel immediately regretful that things went down like they did and I'll help her to get past that and maybe teach a bit of whatever God places in my heart, and that will be that."

"You are so cool, Mrs. Kino."

"Stop."

"So, are you gonna handle Desi's parents too?"

Bree grinned. "Well, they are gonna be a little more difficult, and Ricky is gonna speak with them first, and then I might come in later. Ricky didn't want me to go there alone, just because her father was quite upset with the whole situation and Ricky doesn't want me to be in a potentially dangerous situation. So, we'll work as a team."

Jordan sighed. "Again, Mrs. Kino, you guys are so cool. Oh my goodness, even if I wasn't madly in love with Three, I think I'd knock on your door and beg you guys to adopt me."

Bree laughed. "Life with us is not as easy as you might think. We work hard every single day. And we don't worry about just our little family of four, but our huge extended family and our huger circle of friends, and all the people we work with, and then the people that work with our people, and it goes out to include thousands of people every day. It's a big responsibility. So, speaking about that, I have two loads of laundry I have to get done and several calls I have to make before I go to my appointment." She reached over and picked up Jordan's cup. "So, I'm gonna do up these breakfast dishes and get to it."

"Please, let me help."

Bree laughed. "You, young lady, are gonna go back to bed."

Jordan frowned, but nodded and obediently swung her leg off the bar stool and gingerly stood up. She went to the stairs, placed the crutches by the bottom of the step, placed her good foot on the first step and pressed herself up onto it. She looked up at the long staircase and sighed, wishing she hadn't come down, because going up was gonna be a lot harder and she was feeling a little dizzy and a little nauseated.

Bree watched her and made a decision. "Jordan?"

Jordan didn't turn but stood on the first step and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"I don't want you to attempt going back up the stairs. It's too much. You just got out of the hospital. Go into the den instead, please. You can get all comfy in the recliner and maybe watch some TV if you want."

Jordan looked up the stairs and carefully backed down off the first step. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"You're not trouble, sweet girl. Come on into the den with me."

They went into the den. Bree left her for a moment while she went to put a load into the washer. Then she gathered a basin and some supplies and came back to the den and helped Jordan get cleaned up and put on fresh clothing.

Jordan brushed her teeth and Bree brushed her hair and finally, she gave her a pain pill, tucked a comforter around her, leaned the recliner back and handed her the remote. “If you need anything, just yell.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Not until the afternoon. But don’t worry, sweetie, you won’t be alone.”

“I won’t?”

“No, there are some people coming to see you, and as a matter of fact, your first visitor should be arriving anytime now.”

“First visitor? Who’s coming?”

“Your mother.”

“Oh!” She chewed on her lip. “You called my mom?”

“Yes, I did, and I hope that’s okay. Jewell is my good friend. I know if something happened to Taylor I’d want to know immediately. Why? Were you not gonna tell her what happened?”

“Um, well, it’s just that, she’s had so much trouble because of me, and I was thinking it would be best if she didn’t know. She already has so much to worry about just trying to raise my sister and brother by herself, I didn’t want her to have to worry about me too. I mean, like, I’m okay.”

“Good. Then tell her that when she gets here. But Jordan, it would break my heart if Taylor didn’t tell me something because she didn’t think I was strong enough to bear whatever she had to say.”

Jordan nodded her head. “I guess that is how it would seem, huh? That I think she’s not strong enough to handle it.”

Bree nodded.

“I guess I need to apologize to her for not calling her right away. But you know what, Mrs. Kino, I guess sometimes I do wish my mom was stronger. I mean, when I was little, I wished she would stand up for me against Peter.”

Bree smiled. “Don’t be too hard on her. From what I understand, when it came down to it, she finally did stand up to your stepfather and take your side. Your mom is very sweet, very kind, but somewhat diminutive in her personality, and when a man, a big strong man, is as manipulative and overbearing as Peter was, it was probably very difficult for her to see what was happening or even to know what to do about it. But she finally did. I’m sure she feels very guilty about bringing him into your life. But she’s also torn, because without him, there would be no Josie and Jamie and those two are super special kids, don’t ya think?”

“Yes, ma’am, I do.”

“So, what is there to do except everyone forgive everyone, let go of the past and move forward in love?”

Jordan nodded. “Right? Ya know, you Kinos, like, the whole family, you are all so wise. So smart.”

Bree laughed. “Well, it may seem like that, but I do what my mom says she does, which is, stumble down the correct path. We see through a glass darkly, but we follow God and His Son, both of whom see very clearly, and we trust Them. So, in everything, even concerning you, we, my husband and I, and I’m

sure Eric too, we pray, and we ask God to lead us and give us the words to say that can help you the most. That's all that is. I take no credit of wisdom and give God all the glory."

"And there ya go doin' it again," Jordan said with a smile.

Bree laughed. "Jordan, you are adorable and the more I get to know you, the more I understand why my son is so smitten. Now, you rest and heal."

"Yes, ma'am," Jordan said with a smile, thinking about Three and his mother saying he was "smitten." That was a nice thought.

Bree left the room. She ran upstairs to check Jordan's room and straighten it up for her since she was incapacitated, and then to both Desi's room and Alec's room to see if they needed anything. She noted that Alec's bed again appeared undisturbed. It wasn't up to her to judge. Only to offer the correct situation for now until they got married. And in order to do that, Bree was really hoping to get the parents involved, which meant, the relationships had to be healed, or at least, reestablished. Then, the wedding itself would go a long way to heal them. Or, completely destroy them she thought with a smile.

It was another thirty minutes before security at the gate buzzed Bree to let her know Jewell Perez was coming up the drive. Bree met her at the front door.

"Jewell, so nice to see you."

Jewell looked up worriedly. "I'm so sorry I'm late. I had a hard time getting off of work."

"No worries. Jordan is in the den, and the last time I peeked in at her she was sound asleep. The pain meds Jeffy prescribed are pretty strong."

Jewell nodded, wringing her hands. "I can't understand why she didn't call me immediately."

"Well, don't be too hard on her," Bree said with a smile. "She was in total shock. She actually doesn't even remember driving here. Rick thinks she instinctively drove to the person that makes her feel the safest, and that would be my son. She was a mess and not thinking clearly at all." Bree walked toward the den. "Come on in. Can I get you anything?"

"Oh no, nothing. I'm fine. Thank you so much for taking care of my baby girl, Bree."

"It's my pleasure. Truly. We love her. You've raised an amazing young lady." She stopped just outside the den and sighed. "Now, brace yourself, because she looks bad. She smacked her face on the concrete when she was fighting with the guy. But Jeffy says she's gonna heal just fine."

They entered the den and Jewell bent over her daughter and peered at her face and couldn't suppress the gasp. "Oh, my poor sweet girl," Jewell said softly as tears welled in her eyes.

Jordan's eyes blinked open. "Mom?"

"Oh, yes, baby girl, I'm here," Jewell said with a sniff.

"Mom, don't cry. I'm okay. Really I am."

Jewell nodded. "What other injuries do you have?"

"Well, the worst one is my foot is broken in two places and my ankle is broken. Dr. Kino says the ankle fracture may take the longest, but the bones

are aligned perfectly and it will heal."

"How did your foot get broken?" Jewell asked.

"He twisted my foot trying to turn me over."

"Jewell," Bree began. "We have a video of the attack if you really want to know what happened to her. She doesn't have a lot of memory of it."

"I wanna see it," Jordan said.

Bree shook her head. "I'm not sure you're ready for that. I'll ask Eric, I mean, Eric senior, what he thinks. But let me ask you, do you not want your mother to see it?"

Jordan shrugged. "It's fine. I don't have a problem with anyone seeing it. I mean, it saves me having to explain what happened a gazillion times."

"What other injuries do you have?" Jewell asked, changing the subject.

Jordan shrugged. "Um, so, I have a concussion from bumps on my head. I have a lot of scratches on my arms and stomach and right knee. Other than that, I'm okay. I promise."

"Well, I'll leave you two to talk," Bree said as she excused herself.

"Mom, I need to apologize to you," Jordan began.

✝✝✝

Deuteronomy 6:6-7

"And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."

Chapter Nine

Bree stepped back into the den an hour later. Jewell was on the phone and Jordan was flipping through the channels on the TV. "Everyone okay in here?"

Jordan looked up. "Yes, ma'am. Mom is having a hard time with her boss at work. But other than that, we're okay."

"How's the pain?"

"Bearable."

"Do you need to use the bathroom?"

"Actually, I think I do."

"Let me help you get on up on your feet," Bree said as she pulled away the covers and removed the pillows from under Jordan's cast and eased her foot back down.

Jordan lowered the recliner and immediately grunted in pain.

"Look, I have to go. You do what you have to do," Jewell said as she ended the call and put her phone down on the table and came to help pull Jordan up.

Bree took one arm and Jewell took the other and they gently pulled Jordan up. Then Bree quickly grabbed up the crutches and placed them under Jordan's arms. "You got it?" she asked.

Jordan nodded and headed toward the bathroom down a large hallway that led to the north side of the giant home.

"You call out if you have a problem," Bree said.

"Yes, ma'am," Jordan answered.

The women watched her go. Bree looked at Jewell. "She's gonna be okay. I know it's hard to see her like this."

Jewell nodded. "I do want to see that video."

"Okay. I can set you up in Rick's study in a few minutes. I'm gonna make some lunch in about an hour. Any requests?"

"Yes. That you let me help make it."

Bree laughed. "You know I won't turn that down."

Jordan came back out and they quickly helped her get situated in the recliner with her foot elevated. Then the three women sat together in the den.

"So," Bree began. "Jordan said your boss at work was giving you a hard time?"

Jewell frowned. "Yes. I think I'm about to get fired."

"For what?"

"Because I've needed so much time off lately. I took off today. I was off last Friday because of the memorial. I was off last Monday before that because Josie was taken." She shrugged. "I mean, what am I supposed to do?"

"They don't understand your situation?"

"They say they do understand, and it's not about them trying to make things harder on me, but they have an office to run, and if I can't be there they need to hire someone else."

"How long have you worked there?"

"About ten years now."

"So, you were there when all that happened with Jordan when she was fourteen?"

"Yes. And they seemed to understand."

"Maybe you can show them the pictures I sent you of how Jordan looked when she arrived here last night."

"I did. And most of them, my co-workers, my friends, they were shocked by what they saw and very sympathetic. But there's this new office manager, she's like, hired from a different company, a medical office group that helps doctors to make more money by being more efficient in their practice. And she makes no exceptions in anything. Like, a patient we've been seeing for many years and Dr. Kim always waives his copayment. Well, not anymore, and so, the patient is struggling to make his appointments because he has to save up a few months for the co-payment because he's elderly and on a fixed income. She just doesn't seem to care."

Bree nodded. "There are times to worry about the bottom line and times to have compassion. When all people are concerned about is the bottom line, they forget what the purpose of life is all about. That's why the scripture says the love of money is the root of all evil. One has to be very careful about making sure their priorities don't get mixed up. But, I mean, this woman is just doing what she was hired to do, right?"

Jewell nodded.

"But it was the doctor himself who hired on this group, right?"

"Yes," Jewell said.

"So, the doctor may have been in a financial crunch. He may have decided he needed to make more money. I can't judge, because, maybe the doctor is struggling to make ends meet. But some prayer and some listening and some innovative ideas can be an alternative to hiring a group that has no room for exceptions." She smiled. "But that doesn't help the current situation. So, did they actually fire you?"

"Not yet. But I think she's about to."

"Well then, beat her to it."

"What?"

"I don't mean to be flippant, Jewell, but, you and my husband are about to go into business together, right?"

"Well, eventually."

"My husband doesn't understand the word, 'eventually.' I know you need time to get the location, and to get permits and such. Ricky already has someone that does all of that stuff for him. All he has to do is tell them to make it a priority. So, set a soft opening date. Test your recipes. And go for it. You

can test your recipes on us first if you'd like. It's a hard chore for us but somebody has to do it," she said with a laugh. "But really, this is not a pipe dream, Jewell. This is a real dream. And ya know what? If you don't feel quite ready yet, Angel has a center who is looking to train a new kitchen manager. You could work for her for a little while. It would help you learn how to run a place, and you'd be in your element. So, beat them to it. Give your notice. Maybe this is God giving you a little push out of the nest."

Jewell sat quietly thinking about it.

"What is your hesitation?" Bree asked.

"Well, you may not understand that there is a transition. I mean, there will be a large gap between my last paycheck and the time when I first bring in money from a restaurant. I still have rent to pay, and utilities, and food to buy for my children."

"Of course I understand that. My mom and I, we struggled hard to make ends meet when I was a kid. I haven't forgotten that. But maybe you don't understand that Ricky knows all it takes and how and when the money starts to come in and supporting your family until that happens is part of the startup money he is investing. And he wouldn't invest that money if he didn't believe in you. If he didn't know that he's gonna make all of his startup money back and a lot more, because you, Jewell Perez, are gonna be a huge success!"

Jewell smiled and then frowned.

"Okay, so, what's that frown about?"

She looked up, surprised. "Oh, well, it's not about anything to do with the restaurant. You actually have me ready to jump on that. It was something else you just said."

"What's that?"

"You called me Jewell Perez."

"Is that not your name?"

"Yes, it is." She glanced over at Jordan who'd been very quiet as she'd listened to this conversation. "You just reminded me about something I've been thinking very hard about."

"Okay, tell me what you've been thinking."

"I've been wondering what it would take to change my name, and my children's name. I don't want to be identified anymore with that man who tried to rape my daughter, who tried to kill his own daughter. I don't want any of us to bear his name."

"Well, that can actually be easily taken care of. My brother, Mark, can handle the legal side for you. And then once it goes through, you'll just have to go to the school and change it there, and you'll have to get a new driver's license, so it may be a hassle for you. But if that's what you want to do, we can handle that for you. And if that's what you want to do, then you should do it before you go into business, because you'll want to have your new name on all of the paperwork."

"Mom," Jordan finally spoke up. "I think that's a wonderful idea. Because I have to say, I hate hearing his name whenever I hear someone address you,

and I know the kids don't like him and would have no problem changing their last name. But, like, what would you change it to?"

"To Brooks. To the last name of my first husband whom I loved with all my heart. I would go back to Jewell Brooks."

Jordan smiled. "I love that, Mom. Josie Brooks. Jamie Brooks," she said, testing out the names on her siblings. "It just sounds perfect, doesn't it?"

Bree nodded. "It does. It sounds beautiful." She smiled at Jewell and touched her hand. "Can you stay for dinner tonight? We have so much to talk about."

Jewell frowned. "No, I have to leave here no later than 2:30 to make sure I'm there when the kids get off the bus."

"Well, we could send Agent Wyatt or Agent Brown down to pick them up. They're still on the list, right?"

"Yes. But it's very last minute, isn't it?"

Bree pulled out her phone. "Joey, how difficult would it be to have either Agent Wyatt or Agent Brown pick up Josie and Jamie from school and bring them up to my house?"

"Not difficult at all. Let me check a minute."

Bree waited until Joey came back to her.

"Yep, I can get Wyatt over there. Is there a problem?"

"No, I mean, no emergency. I just want Jewell to stay here with Jordan."

"Okay, well, it just so happens that I can easily arrange it today, but Bree, you know, we're not a transportation service."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry. Never mind."

Joey laughed. "Yeah, that's not gonna work. Wyatt will pick them up but it'll cost ya."

"Name your price."

"You have to make a public appearance for me."

"Where?"

"I don't know, but I'm gonna hold this one in my pocket."

Bree giggled. "You do that my not-so-little brother."

"I will. Gotta go. Love ya, Bree."

"Love you, Joey."

She ended the call and smiled at Jewell. "Agent Wyatt will pick up the kids and bring them here."

"You work fast," Jewell said.

"The whole family does that," Jordan added.

Bree grinned. "This is just too much fun. So, Jewell Brooks, should I call Angel and tell her you'd like to take that kitchen manager position?"

"Well, I don't know how to manage a kitchen. I've never done it."

"You've never done it on a large scale. But I bet you can learn. The manager that's there now would love to train you and teach you before she leaves."

"So, why is she leaving?"

"She's getting married."

"Oh! Well, that's wonderful."

Bree grinned. "Isn't it though? Now, we have to get in here and make some lunch for about eight people, so Jordan, you can rest or watch TV, or, read. Would you like something to read?"

Jordan nodded. "Yes. Um, so, Three was telling me once about a study guide that he uses when he's reading the Bible. Do you know if that is somewhere in the house?"

Bree smiled. "Yes, it's right here." She went to the bookshelf and pulled down a beautiful, large, hardcover book with a picture of a part of a Michelangelo painting on the front. "Here ya go. And I love that you actually want to read this."

Jordan nodded. "Three always says if you want things to go well, just learn what God's will is for you. So, I think to do that I need to read and understand the Bible."

"Well, this will help. But remember, this study guide is still written by humans, so don't take everything it says as truth. You still have to pray, and develop that relationship with God and with Jesus, and with the Holy Spirit so that you can discern meanings for yourself."

"Now that sounds hard."

"No, talking to God, that's the easy part. It will make you happy. Wait and see." She started to leave the room.

"Hey, um Mrs. Kino, so who are the eight people you're making lunch for?" Jordan called out.

Bree came back to the room with a smile. "You'll see."

✞✞✞

An hour later, Jewell and Bree had an elaborate lunch prepared. Thick sandwiches made of sliced chicken breast, with lettuce, tomato, onion, peppers, and avocado. Fresh fruit salad. Quinoa-based chips. And Jewell was just taking the first pan of some giant oatmeal cookies from the oven when Bree's phone buzzed.

Bree smiled. "Our visitors are here." She went to the front door and smiled as Colton, Jackie and two other girls from Jordan's softball team parked in front and came up the wide circular front steps.

One girl stopped and stared. "Oh my gosh, you really are Breanna Adams," the girl said. "You're every bit as beautiful in person as you are on the screen."

"Thank you, hon," she said as she smiled at the group. "Now, y'all come on up and tell me your names and welcome to our home."

The girl who'd already spoken smiled. "Hey, I'm Colton. I'm one of Jordan's teammates and also her roommate."

"Hello, Colton, it's so nice to meet you."

"Uh, you too," she said with a giggle.

"I'm Jackie, and I'm not a teammate but I am a roommate."

"Hello, Jackie. Very nice to meet you."

"And I'm Jaiden, I play first base," she said as she held out her hand.

Bree shook her hand.

"And I'm Nikki, and I play shortstop."

Nikki also extended her hand and Bree shook it. "It's so nice to meet you all. Please come in. Jordan's in the den and she doesn't know you're coming so, it's gonna be a nice surprise."

They all checked out the house as they entered and waited for Breanna Adams to close the door and lead the way.

The house was large. Light and airy. Beautiful. They passed a front room where all the furniture was white and all but one of the tables glass, the one exception being marble. The artwork on the walls was exquisite. The room was giant. Maybe the size of a small ballroom. It had hardwood floors and three large area rugs for different settings. One grouping was near the front windows. Another near a baby grand piano. And one near the far back wall. Each grouping contained large sofas, chairs, tables and lamps.

Bree led them to the back of the house. They could see there was a kitchen on the left, then a dining room and then the hall down to the den where Bree went straight in and the girls followed behind.

She leaned over Jordan, who'd fallen asleep again, and lifted the book from her chest. Jordan's eyes fluttered open. Bree smiled at her. "Sweetie, you have some visitors."

Jordan looked around. "Colton?"

The others came into the room and stood around her.

Jordan's eyes lit up. "Hey, everyone. Hey, Nikki, Jaiden, hey, Jackie! This is a nice surprise."

It took them all a few moments to respond because they were taken aback at Jordan's appearance.

"Man, Jordy. That dude really did a number on you," Jackie said.

Jordan nodded. "Yeah, pretty huh?"

Colton teared up and bent down to look closely. "Oh Jordan, I'm so sorry this happened to you."

"Thanks, but you know what I just realized?"

"What?"

"The guy has raped several girls on campus and I'm just really glad it was me and not one of you."

Bree smiled in delight at the beautiful Christ-like words. "Jordan, that is a beautiful thing for you to say. And the guy got caught because he went after you. So, even though it's been hard for you, you saved who knows how many other girls."

Jordan nodded in understanding. "Well, I guess if God used me to catch the guy, then I'm glad He did."

"You are such an angel," Bree whispered. She looked around at the silent girls. "And you ladies are so sweet to come and visit our girl. So, we've made you a delicious lunch and it's ready, so please join us."

"Food? I never turn down food," Jaiden quipped.

Bree gently took the pillow from under Jordan's foot again. This time Colton and Nikki took each arm and pulled her slowly up out of the chair. Bree

handed her the crutches. "Are you steady?"

Jordan nodded.

"Okay, everyone, follow me. We're just gonna eat at the kitchen table."

They entered the kitchen as Jewell was pulling another pan of cookies from the oven.

"Do you all know Jordan's mom?" Bree asked.

"Never met her, but know of her," Jackie replied.

"Well, everyone, this is Ms. Brooks, Jordan's mom," Bree said with a gleam in her eye because she used the new name she would have very soon.

"I thought her last name was Perez," Jackie said.

Jewell nodded. "It is, but it's about to be changed. Don't want that last name anymore."

The girls all nodded.

"It smells so good in here," Colton said.

"Those are some of my mom's cookies. She's an amazing cook and she's gonna open a restaurant soon."

"Really? That is so cool, Ms. Brooks," Jaiden said.

Jewell smiled and nodded. "I'm kind of getting excited. When it opens you'll all have to tell your friends and come to see me."

"We will," Nikki assured her.

"Jordan," Bree said softly. "Will you say the blessing?"

Jordan's eyes opened wide. This was unexpected. She looked up at Mrs. Kino's kind face. The woman smiled and nodded at her.

Jordan swallowed hard and bowed her head. "Um, Father, we just want to, uh, thank You for this food, and, we ask You to bless it, and, well, thank You Father for the Kinos and for my mom taking such good care of me and thank You for these friends who have taken time to come to visit me, and thank You Father for every single thing. In Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," Bree said firmly. "That was lovely, Jordan. Everyone, dig in. The sandwiches on your plate just have chicken breast and lettuce, but you can add tomatoes and onions and peppers and any condiments you'd like," she said, pointing to a giant platter laden with veggies. "There is also a fresh fruit salad, carrots and celery sticks with Jewell's homemade dressing, sort of like ranch, but better. And, for dessert are some of the best cookies in the world. Enjoy," Bree finished as she sat down at the table to join them.

There was only slight chatter as everyone passed condiments around and made their sandwiches. Finally they settled and everyone was happily eating their lunch.

"Mrs. Kino," Jordan said. "This is delicious. Thank you, and you too Mom, for taking the time to make such a nice lunch for my friends."

"I'm glad you like it," Bree answered. "It was our pleasure."

"Mrs. Kino," Jackie began. "You have a beautiful home. I can't believe I'm sitting in the home of the Breanna Adams and Ricky Kino."

"It's no big deal. We're just people."

"You're so much more than just people," Jackie answered.

Bree shook her head. “Really, you need to get that out of your mind.”

“Is Mr. Kino coming home any time soon?” Jackie asked.

She shook her head. “No. He’s busy training Eric and Gabe. They won’t be home until this evening.”

Jackie frowned. “What about Taylor?”

Bree laughed. “Taylor is at school and won’t be home until later,” she said as her phone buzzed. She stood and stepped away from the table to take the call. When she came back she nodded kindly. “Jordan, the police are here to speak with you. I told them to come on up to the house and I’ll have them wait in Ricky’s study. You can speak with them there. How’s your pain level?”

“It’s pretty bad right now because my foot is down.”

Bree nodded. “Finish your lunch. They can wait and let me get you a pill. The rest of you, are welcome to stay for a while. Hopefully she won’t take too long. I think they just want her to ID the guy.” She turned and grabbed the platter of still warm cookies from the counter. “And don’t forget the best part of this meal.” She placed it on the table, went to get Jordan’s pill, placed it in her hand and then left the room.

The girls heard the men’s voices as Bree greeted them and led them to Ricky’s study and asked them if she could get anything for them.

Jordan took her pill, grabbed a cookie and took a huge bite. “Mom, as always, so so good.”

“They really are,” Colton said. “I can’t wait to come eat at your restaurant!”

Jewell smiled.

Jordan pushed back from the table. “Well, I guess I won’t keep the detectives waiting. Colton, can you help me?”

Colton stood and helped Jordan get to her feet and handed her the crutches. Jordan grunted in pain as she made her way to the study as Bree was coming back. Bree smiled. “Don’t be nervous. I’m gonna be right there with you. Go ahead, I just have to do one thing.”

Jordan nodded and headed down the hallway.

Bree went back to the kitchen. “Jewell, if you or the girls would like to see the video of what happened to Jordan, it’s in the file. Just turn on the TV in the den and go to the file folder and you’ll see it.”

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

“I do,” Nikki said quickly.

“Good, you can watch it while she’s in with the detectives, but we don’t want her to see it yet, so, if she comes back out, please turn it off.”

Jewell nodded. “I think we’ll go do that and wait to do up the dishes.”

Bree smiled and headed back to the study. Jordan was shaking the detectives’ hands.

“Jordan,” Bree said. “Sit down here on the sofa and put your leg up here,” she ordered.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jordan said.

Bree turned to the detectives and held her phone up. “I’m recording this session so that I don’t have to try to recall everything for my husband when he

asks me about this meeting."

The officers nodded.

"Jordan," one of the detectives said softly. "We're sorry for what happened to you and we can keep this guy in jail thanks to you. We already have preliminary DNA samples, and we'd like you to take a look at some pictures and see if one of these guys is the one who assaulted you. We might actually need you to come down to the station to do it in person, but for now, if you can take a look at these photos, that would be very helpful. The person who attacked you may or may not be in these photographs. Take your time."

Jordan nodded.

He handed her eight 8X10 photos enclosed in plastic sheets. She went through them carefully. She quickly discarded three of them. Then looked harder at the other five. Then slowly discarded three more. The guys in the last two pictures were similar. Both had scraggly light brown hair. Both were clean-shaven. Both had thick eyebrows. She leaned forward and looked into the eyes, because she remembered him staring right into her eyes as he strangled her. And there he was, staring back at her. Her eyes immediately welled with tears and her hands began to shake. She held the picture out with trembling fingers to the detective. "That's him," she said softly.

The detectives smiled and nodded. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive."

"Good job, Jordan. That is the guy we have in custody."

She nodded. "He won't like, get out on bail, right?"

The detectives frowned. "With the charges he's facing, the DA can ask the court to keep him detained. We can't promise what the judge will decide."

Jordan moaned. "No, please, get them to not set bail. Please."

"We'll do what we can."

Bree moved forward and put her arm around Jordan. "Let's wait and see instead of worrying about it."

Jordan shook her head. "I've been living under the threat of a criminal almost my whole life, and now he's dead. And immediately, this new person comes into my life. I can't take this. I can't."

Bree nodded in understanding. "Let's talk to Justin and Mark, okay?" She looked at the police. "Is it possible that she can submit a victim statement or ask the DA to argue that he should remain detained?"

"Actually, she *can* make an appeal to the District Attorney. Your attorneys will tell you what to do."

Bree nodded.

"Miss Brooks, we'd like to get your statement on exactly what happened that night."

Jordan nodded. "What do you want to know?"

"Let's start at the beginning. Do you remember what you were doing right before you met up with the perpetrator?"

"I was cleaning the apartment and then leaving to take out the trash and go get something to eat."

✝✝✝

By the time Bree and Jordan emerged from the meeting with the detectives, Jewell and the girls had watched the video and played a few parts over again as they discussed it. They'd all had a good cry, but they didn't say anything to Jordan about what they'd seen.

Jewell had made lunch bags of sandwiches and cookies and presented them to the detectives and asked them to please do everything right so that this guy doesn't go free. They promised her they would do everything they could to make sure he never again saw the light of day.

The girls chatted for a little while about school, about softball and lamented that Jordan was out of commission. Jordan didn't offer much. She was feeling more and more like crying, or at least not nearly as cheerful as she'd been earlier. By the time the girls took their leave Jordan was exhausted and was tucked into the recliner and fell fast asleep.

Bree left for her appointment with Alec's mother and thirty minutes later, Agent Wyatt arrived at the house with Jewell's children.

Jewell couldn't get the scenes from the video out of her head. Seeing her daughter fight so hard for her life, it did something to her. It tore at her heart in a way she didn't think she'd ever get over. Not ever. And then she thought about how her own husband had done the same thing. Tried to rape her daughter. What was it about men and this rape thing. Why was it even a thing? Why was it so prevalent? All one had to do was do an internet search about rape and find out that it's about as common as the cold. Why? And it's been like that since the beginning of time. It's enough to make women hate men. And then, there are men like the Kino men, the Adamses, the Lees, and all of the Ameritech Agents, good men, men who protect women, who love them, who take care of them. Why is rape even a thing? She shook her head. She felt powerless to do anything for her daughter, who was obviously frightened and who'd been through enough. Enough. "Enough," Jewell said aloud.

✝✝✝

October 29th, Tuesday Afternoon
Morgan Home, Hillcrest, California

"Hello," Bree said sweetly to the woman who answered the door. "You must be Mrs. Morgan?"

The woman nodded. "Yes. But please call me Ivana. And I can't believe I'm standing here talking to Breanna Adams."

Bree flashed a brilliant smile. Sometimes her name opened doors to homes, and sometimes, hopefully, to hearts. "Don't be silly, I'm just a regular person," she said, giving her usual response.

"Please, come in."

Bree walked into a small home. Small, but neat and clean and well-maintained. She followed Ivana Morgan into the small living room and took a seat in a small upholstered chair. The home smelled of furniture polish. Bree knew if the woman was anything like her own mother, she would have cleaned feverishly because someone famous was coming to her home.

"Can I get you anything?" Ivana asked.

"No, I'm fine, but thank you."

Ivana took a seat on the edge of a gray sofa that appeared a little worn. "So, you said you have news of my son?"

"Yes, I do. I thought you might like to know what's going on in his life, and I hope I'm not overstepping my bounds, but I know if I wasn't in contact with one of my children, I would want to know what they were up to."

Ivana nodded, biting a little on her lower lip. "Alec and I had words and parted on a very sour note. I had no idea how to reach him because his phone was turned off."

"I understand. Let me fill you in, because I knew you'd want to know. My son, Eric, and my husband, ran into Alec and Destiny at a gas station. It was obvious to them that the two kids needed help. They were homeless, dirty and very hungry."

"Oh."

Bree went on before Ivana could say anything else. "They'd had quite a hard time, apparently. So, Ricky and Eric fed them, but they just couldn't leave them there, living in a tent in the woods behind a gas station, so they brought them home. By the way, Ivana, you have raised a wonderful son, and he's so smart."

Ivana nodded her head, already looking regretful and repentant.

"It's been delightful getting to know him and Desi. They are such sweet kids, and they know and understand completely that they made a mistake. I'm talking about Desi's pregnancy. They slipped into one moment of letting those teenage hormones get the best of them and they are having to deal with the consequences. But I have to give it to your son, he was bound and determined to do the right thing, though he knew it would be extremely difficult to do it."

"Well, I told him it would be impossible and I was right."

Bree nodded. "Sure, trying to take care of a pregnant girlfriend and himself and still go to school, and hold onto a job, feed two people, study, make something of yourself, even with Alec's talents and brains, pretty much impossible, without someone to help him. But now, that's water under the bridge. Alec seems to have a fine sense of responsibility. My father-in-law calls it a warrior's attitude. He doesn't shun his duties. He's willing to take responsibility for his mistakes. He just didn't know how to go about it without some help. So, we offered to help."

"Oh, well, that's very kind of you. But, I mean, what exactly are you doing? Because, I barely make ends meet and I can't pay you back."

Bree frowned. "This visit isn't about money, Ivana. I'm here as one mother to another, because I thought you would like to know that Alec is getting his life together. He just needed a little boost. So we connected Alec and Desi with the *Angel Network Foundation* that offers help to women or teens, who find themselves in precarious circumstances, meaning, pregnant and homeless. They have offered Alec and Desi a home just outside of Los Angeles for them to use until next fall. And he has found a job working at the prestigious law

firm of Lee and Adams, which is my brother's law firm. He will work there for one year."

"And then what happens after one year?"

"Well, his scholarship with USC has been reinstated and he and Desi and the baby will be moving to live in a home, again offered by the *Angel Network Foundation*, while he goes to school. They will not be expected to move from there until he graduates. So, he is going to be able to do what you and he had planned all along. Earn his bachelor's degree, attend law school, earn his JD, pass the bar, become an attorney, and make something of himself. He *WILL* be able to provide for his little family."

"This is simply wonderful," Ivana said, tears in her eyes.

Bree smiled. "Yes, it is. And when he graduates, he already has an internship lined up with Lee and Adams. But I have to tell you, it's not because of charity on my brother's part. It's because your son is so brilliant."

"So, where is Alec right now?"

"Right now, he's out with his girlfriend, shopping for their new home."

"Shopping? How? I mean, if he's homeless."

"It's a loan. He'll eventually pay us back by paying it forward."

"I see. Well, I guess I need to thank you."

"No, not at all. We're happy to help and feel like God placed Alec and Destiny in our path so that we can learn and grow by helping them."

"Well, that's a very kind way of seeing things."

"We're not being kind. We see it as it is. The truth is, God is real, and He will answer our prayers and interact with us. All we have to do is ask." She smiled sweetly. Sighed. "Anyway, Alec and Desi both are staying with us currently, but they will be moving into the home in a few weeks. They're gonna be okay. The only thing that hurts him right now is that he desperately wants to share his happiness with his mother and he doesn't know how to begin that healing process. He doesn't know how to reach out to you."

Ivana nodded. "Well, he knows my phone number."

"Yes, and now that he has a phone, he might call you if he overcomes the nerves. Or, I can give his number to you if you'd like."

She nodded. "Yes, please do that. May I ask, does he know that you're here talking to me?"

"No, not yet anyway. But Ivana, the bottom line is, I think you must be very proud of how smart your son is, how strong he is. Much of what he did concerning Desi, he did that because of you."

"Because of me? What do you mean? He got seduced? He gave up his scholarship? He threw his life away because of me?"

Bree sighed. "No, that's not what I meant at all. But, when he and Desi, and by the way, it takes two, when they got pregnant, he refused to leave her because of how much it hurt when your husband left you."

"He told you that?"

"Yes. He said he couldn't bring himself to do to Desi, what your husband did to you. He has a strong sense of rightness. He is a light. And I'm sure you

can see from the way the two of you clashed, that he also is a man to be reckoned with, one that sticks to his word, that sticks to his guns, even though it's difficult. I think that's why God placed him in the path of someone who had the resources to give him the help he needed, the boost he needed. And the little boost we've given him is all he'll need. He's so strong, mentally and emotionally, he'll work hard and he'll succeed in what he's trying to do and he'll be a good father and a good husband at the same time and that's all because you raised a son with all of those amazing qualities. You did that. So, yeah, Alec made a mistake. He knows that. He's sorry. It's a good person who can admit that they've made mistakes, repent, make a change and move forward doing it right."

"So, he's going back to school next year, and he still has his scholarship and still has his internship," Ivana said slowly. "So, he's not gonna end up like me, barely scraping by to make ends meet."

"Financially, he's going to be just fine. He'll be able to support his family. But life isn't only about that. Your amazing son is going to be very successful at everything he does. He's such a good person, and the only thing keeping him from being truly happy is he wants to share his life with you."

"He told you that?"

"Actually, no. Desi told us that."

Ivana frowned.

Bree smiled. "Desi told us what she wanted if she had three wishes. She wished to have her family back in their lives, and Alec's mom back in their lives and to graduate from high school."

"Yeah, well, maybe she should have thought about that before she went and seduced my son."

Bree sighed. "Ivana, come on now, that's the second time you've said those words. Do you really believe that it was Desi's plan to tempt Alec into taking her virginity and get her pregnant? Do you really think that Alec was just an innocent bystander? They went to that room together. Their intention was to do a lot of making out and just be near each other. But there was alcohol present, and they lost their inhibitions and they let their guard down."

"Alec actually told you that? How did you get him to talk about what happened?"

"We listened. We didn't jump to conclusions or judge him. We truly wanted to understand how two obviously good kids could end up living in a tent behind a gas station."

"And how did they end up there?"

"In a nutshell, when his car broke down and he lost his job, he was unable to find another job. It's hard to find work when you don't have a phone or transportation. So, no job, they get evicted and things went downhill pretty fast. They stayed at a shelter for a few weeks, but it wasn't safe. Some guy picked a fight with Alec and that's when his glasses got broken. So not only was he in a tent trying to take care of the mother of his child, but he could barely see."

Tears formed in Ivana's eyes as she thought about how hard her son had to struggle. She sniffed. "I thought if I refused to let him and Desi live here, if I refused to fix his car, if I took him off my phone plan, if I played hardball with him, then he'd give in and not throw his life away."

Bree nodded. "I understand your thinking. I believe he thought if he abandoned Desi, whom he truly loves, and his own child, then *that* is what would be throwing his life away. And he is absolutely correct about that, because he would've never forgiven himself if he'd gone that route."

Ivana nodded. "I'm beginning to see that I played this whole thing wrong and in the process, I've lost my son."

"And don't forget your grandchild. But really, all is not lost. He wants you in his life. He's just not sure about approaching you. He's tried that and he probably won't try again. It hurt too much. But if *you* were to approach *him,* it would be wonderful. He wants to share his family with you. He wants you to know his child. And he wants to marry Desi and he wants you to be a part of that wedding." Bree smiled. "You think about it." She handed her a piece of paper. "This is his new number. Call him. People make mistakes. I surely have. Alec did. Desi did. You did. But we can repent of those mistakes and do better and life can be a wonderful gift."

Ivana nodded her head, feeling too emotional to speak.

Bree took her hand and squeezed it. "Please forgive me for being intrusive. I wanted so badly to help you and Alec to heal your relationship and I know I can be a little pushy. But I thought if I came to you, mother to mother, you would see that I simply wanted to help."

"There's nothing to forgive. And I need to thank you for coming and telling me about Alec."

"You've raised a fine young man. And you did it on your own. You fought hard to make sure he would become a successful young man. You set that example for him. Isn't it kind of funny that the rift between you two was because he was simply following your example."

Ivana smiled. "I'm not sure that 'funny' is what I would call it."

Bree gave a soft laugh. "Well, maybe not. But sometimes you have to find the humor in a situation." Bree rose. "Well, I best be on my way. I hope you call him soon because they want to be married as soon as possible. My number is also on that paper. Please don't share it, but if you have a problem or need anything, please let me know."

Ivana shook her head. "You are a very kind person. Suddenly, it's like I don't see you as some famous actress. I see you just as a kind person who wants to help people."

"I'm glad that's how you see me."

"May I ask you a question? Have you spoken to Desi's parents yet?"

"No. But Ricky has an appointment to speak to them this coming Sunday. He's going to speak at their church, and then meet with them at their home. They don't know he's gonna speak at their church so please don't say anything."

Ivana nodded. "Believe me, we don't speak. Good luck on that."

Bree smiled. "We don't need luck. We just need God's blessing."

✝✝✝

By the time Bree returned home, Jewell had gone out of her way and prepared dinner for the family. Bree was extremely grateful for that because she was tired, or more like, drained.

Josie and Jamie were sitting at the kitchen table doing homework. Bree greeted the children and sniffed the air. "What did you make, Jewell? Because it smells wonderful. I was gonna throw together some hamburgers and a couple side dishes and call it a meal."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with that," Jewell said. "But I used the ground beef and made chopped steak with mushroom gravy, cooked up some caramelized carrots and threw together a salad. No big deal. Oh, and I whipped up a quick bundt cake. I just need to make the drizzle and it will all be done."

"You are amazing." She looked around. "So, where is Taylor?"

"She's out on the deck talking to Jordan. Jordan is acting a little strange, like, sad, or nervous, or something, not positive like she was earlier, and I think Taylor is trying to cheer her up."

Bree nodded. "I think the talk with the detectives was a bit unsettling for her. Eric will be home soon, so hopefully, that will help." She headed for the door and stepped out onto the deck.

Taylor looked up with a smile. "Hey Mom."

"Hello, sweetheart. Hi, Jordan. I'm glad to see you kept your foot elevated. How are you feeling?"

Jordan shrugged. "I'm okay, I guess."

"Pain level?"

She frowned. "Um, maybe an eight."

"Oh, that's not good. Why didn't you ask for a pill?"

She sighed. "I wasn't sure if it was time yet."

"Let me get one for you."

Jordan didn't reply and Bree realized she was definitely not herself. Bree went inside to get the medication and looked up when the men came in the kitchen door.

Ricky smiled at her. "Hello there, Breanna," he said softly.

She smiled. "Hi Rick. Hold on a second and let me take this pill to Jordan out on the deck and I'll greet you properly."

"I'll take it to Jordan," Eric said.

Bree smiled and handed him the pill and the bottle of water, then turned to her husband. He put his arms around her and kissed her, pulled back and looked her over. "You look tired."

"I am."

"How'd the appointment go?"

"Which one?"

"Both."

"The one with Ivana Morgan went pretty well, but it took a lot of energy

trying to say all the right things. I think she's coming around."

At that moment Desi and Alec came in through the kitchen door and that ended that conversation topic. Both Ricky and Bree took time to greet the couple and tell them dinner was ready.

They ran upstairs with their bags and said they'd be right back down.

Ricky sighed. "And the other appointment?"

"Well, Jordan was able to pick the guy out of a photo lineup. But when Jordan realized he might get out on bail, she panicked. She's having a hard time right now. Which is a shame, because earlier she was very positive. She even told her friends who came to visit that she was glad the guy got her and not one of them."

Ricky nodded his head. "Wow. That was positive."

"Yes, but she's not so positive right now. She seems downright depressed."

"Okay. Well, maybe Eric can bring her out of it."

"I hope so. Right now though, dinner is ready thanks to Jewell, so let's gather everyone in the dining room and eat and get the kitchen clean because I might want to go to bed early."

Ricky nodded. "You go sit at the table and I'll bring your plate to you."

"No, you don't h..."

"Don't argue with me, young lady. Go sit."

Ricky smiled at Jewell. "Thanks so much for making dinner."

"My pleasure, Mr., uh, I mean Ricky." She turned and grabbed a stack of plates and utensils and placed them on the counter. "Josie, Jamie, very carefully help yourselves and take your plate out to the table. And don't forget to grab your fork."

They obeyed immediately.

Within a few minutes the whole family had been served, the food blessed and they sat around the dining room table, totally enjoying the meal. Everyone except Jordan.

She'd brightened up when Eric walked out on the deck. But he could tell all was not well. She was quiet during dinner, taking very small bites, and not making eye contact.

Young Eric reached over and squeezed her hand. She didn't respond. He was tired. Exhausted. He'd had a very long and very hard training day. Jordan had been in the back of his mind all day, and he'd been anxious to get back to her. He'd hoped she would be better, but she seemed worse. She didn't even seem happy to see him.

The family was talking about Alec's and Desi's shopping trip, and how well young Eric and Gabe sparred today, and about how Jewell might lose her job. Bree was happy that Ricky responded to Jewell with almost the exact same words Bree had spoken.

Young Eric wolfed down his food, got seconds and did it again. He looked at Jordan. "You've barely eaten a thing, babe. You need nourishment in order to heal."

She blinked up at him. Nodded. Picked up her fork and took a bite of

chopped steak. She sighed. She took a few more bites after that and then looked up at the guy she loved. "I really need to get my foot up."

"Would you like me to fix you up in the den?"

Bree shook her head. "She's probably sick of the den. She's been there all day. She came down the stairs this morning before breakfast but we weren't able to get her back up the stairs. It was too much of a struggle, so we decided to wait for one of you strong men to help her."

"So, are you saying you'd like to go up to bed?"

She nodded. "If you don't mind."

He stood, "Mom, Dad, everyone, if you'll excuse us."

They all nodded.

Young Eric gathered his and Jordan's dishes and took them into the kitchen and then pulled out Jordan's chair and simply scooped her up into his arms.

She leaned her head against his chest and allowed herself to relax as he carried her up the stairs. He laid her on her bed, placed the pillow up under her left foot, sat on the side of the bed, removed his own shoes and lay down next to her. Turning toward her, he pushed his arm under her head so that he could get as close as possible.

"Talk to me, Jordan. What's wrong?"

"I don't think I want to talk about it right now."

"Did something happen today? Like, with Colton or Jackie?"

"No, they were great."

"Okay. So, maybe with the detectives?"

Her chin quivered. "I don't want to talk about it." She sniffed.

"Okay. We won't talk about that. How about how you're feeling physically. Are you still in pain?"

"Yes. Probably from being up and about so much today."

"Well, tomorrow, you will stay up here in bed," he ordered.

She didn't even argue and he knew she was definitely not herself.

"And, any other symptoms? Headaches? Dizziness?"

"I was dizzy earlier today, which is why I couldn't make it back up the stairs. Right now, I'm a little bit sick to my stomach."

He nodded. "Okay, well, Dad told me that Jeffy is out with Cam and wants to stop by to check on you in a little while."

She sighed.

He ran a hand down her arm. "Jordan, I don't know if it helps at all, but I want you to know that I love you with my whole being. I can't even tell you how much I love you."

She sighed. "Thank you. It helps."

"If you weren't so banged up, I'd show you some of that love."

"It's okay."

They lay together in silence for several minutes. It was Jordan who finally spoke. "I'm glad you're home."

He sighed. "Me too. It was a hard day. So far, in our entire relationship, I've been in training. It will all be over next week. And then I'll have all the

time in the world to spend with you."

"That will be nice."

"You know, my father spoke with your coaches this morning."

She turned her head. "Really?"

"Yes. Of course, they are not happy that their left-handed scholarship pitcher is out of commission for at least six to eight weeks. But he shared a few of the pictures that Taylor took and a little of the video of the attack. Mom said you gave permission for people to see it. I hope that's okay."

Jordan shrugged. "Yeah, I don't care. I mean, it's not really embarrassing. He didn't get to do what he wanted. I fought hard, and I think I want people to see that."

Eric nodded. "Well, they did see that, and they were impressed with how hard you fought and they were very sympathetic."

"So, you said Taylor took pictures of me?"

"Oh, uh, yes—mostly for court proceedings, like just to document how banged up you were when we first saw you. Anyway, I don't think you're gonna lose your scholarship yet. They're gonna wait and see if you can get back to it, and I have no doubt that you can."

She nodded. The way she was feeling, it was like she no longer wanted to play, but she didn't dare tell him that. He would think she's a quitter, maybe be disappointed in her. Hopefully she'll buck up soon. But just the thought of living on the edge again, wondering if this guy is gonna come after her, it was playing games in her mind and making her feel sick. She knew it wasn't logical, but she couldn't help it.

He looked over at her, studied her face, touched a red scratch on the tip of her nose. "Does that hurt?"

"A little."

He touched her chin. "How about that?"

"A little."

He touched her eyelid. "How about that?"

She smiled. "No."

Eric jumped up quickly out of the bed at the knock on the door.

"Come in," he said.

Josie and Jamie came in. Jamie had Jordan's crutches in his hands. "Jordan, we have to leave and Mom told us to come bring you your crutches and say 'goodbye' to you," Josie said.

She came around the bed and leaned over her big sister. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

"It's okay, sweetie. I'm gonna be just fine. Don't you worry."

Josie looked up at Eric. "I wish you'd been with her and then you could've saved her like you saved me."

He smiled. "I wish I'd been with her too."

"Yeah, and then you could've killed the guy," Jamie said as he came around the bed and laid the crutches on the floor next to his sister.

Eric frowned. "Jamie, killing isn't always the answer."

"Well, *I* think it would be the answer this time."

Eric couldn't think of anything to say to that, because he pretty much agreed. He tried to think of something wise, like his father would say, but nothing came to mind.

"It's okay," Jordan said. "He's gonna go to jail for a very long time. Maybe even for the rest of his life." Jordan realized even as she said the words that she herself didn't believe them.

"Good," Jamie said as he came to the bed and kissed his sister's cheek. "Bye, Jordan."

"Bye, kiddo. See you soon."

"Bye, Jordan," Josie said. She squeezed Jordan's hand.

They started to leave the room, but then Jamie came back and bowed to young Eric. Eric smiled and returned the honor. Then Josie came back and hugged him. "I love you," she whispered.

He hugged her tight. "I love you too, little Josie girl. And I'll always be here for you if you ever need to talk about what happened back there in Mexico. Always."

She smiled. Nodded. "Bye."

The children left the room and Eric immediately got back into bed with Jordan. He pushed his arm up under her again so she could rest her head on his shoulder, and pulled her body close to his, then sighed in pleasure. "It's strange," he began, "I mean, the way even being ten feet away from you feels like miles and then when I'm close to you again like this, it's such a relief. It's like when I'm not close to you I'm missing a part of myself."

She sighed. "That is a very mushy thing to say."

He gave a soft laugh. "Right?"

They stayed snuggled close together, quiet and calm.

Their eyes flew open when Jeffy came in the door. Eric got up quickly, scrubbing his hands over his face. He pulled his phone from his pocket. It was 8:27. They'd been asleep for over an hour. "Aunt Jeffy, you could have knocked. What if we'd been, well, in the middle of something."

She grinned. "I knew you weren't doing anything but sleeping." Jeffy sighed. She came to him, placed her hands on either side of his face and frowned. "You need to go get some sleep. Your body is exhausted. But first go get that piece of cake you missed at dinner and are thinking about right now."

He grinned. "Oh, you're good. I'll never doubt your powers again."

"Silly boy, I have no powers. I only have the knowing that God gives me. He's the one with power. Now get out of here. I have to remove Jordan's clothing to examine all of her injuries."

He nodded and looked over at Jordan. "I'll be back a little later."

She smiled. "Go eat your cake. I'm fine."

✞✞✞

2 Timothy 1:7

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear,
but of power and of love and of a sound mind"

Chapter Ten

October 30th, 2:02 AM, Wednesday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jordan woke when she accidentally kicked her foot and it landed hard on the bed. The pain shot through her. She grunted as she sat up, a little disoriented. She turned to look at the clock on her nightstand because she didn't have her phone. She frowned. The clock showed it was after two in the morning. She tried to remember what had happened. Dr. Kino had come and examined her. She'd said physically Jordan was healing well, but emotionally, she was having a hard time. She said Jordan was feeling a crippling amount of fear. Dr. Kino had tried to counsel her a bit and then said she needed to speak with Grandmaster Kino. Jordan had agreed to do so. Then Dr. Kino gave Jordan a massage on her neck and shoulders and head and that was the last thing Jordan remembered.

She looked beside her to see if Eric had come back, but the bed was empty. That made her feel desperate to see him, but Dr. Kino had said he was exhausted. He probably went to eat his cake and then went to bed. After all, he had to get up and go train again early in the morning. She needed to stop being so needy and clingy. Still, even as she thought that, she felt the fear and desperation creep into her mind. And pain. Her whole leg was throbbing in pain, and the pills were downstairs.

She sat up and swung her legs down to the floor, grabbed up her crutches and headed to the bathroom. When she came out, she headed back to the bed, then turned and headed to the door, then turned and headed back to the bed. She ended up pacing the room several times. She didn't want to go back to bed. She was anxious and nervous and in so much pain. Finally, she went to the door and stepped out into the hall.

There were two dim night lights plugged into sockets at each end of the very long, wide hallway. Jordan made her way to the top of the wide curved staircase and looked down. She didn't dare chance it. She could fall, or at the very least, get stuck down there and not be able to get back up to bed. Sighing, she looked down the hall. It was a very long hall, maybe even running the length of the home, which was a long way. Maybe, she thought, if she walked the length of the hallway a few times, she'd get tired enough to go back to bed.

She headed slowly down, trying hard to not let the crutches make noise as she placed them. Just past the staircase on the left was the room that Gabe used when he stayed here. She looked across the hall from Gabe's room to another door and went over and opened it. It was another bedroom. She went farther

down the hall, maybe twenty feet or more and came to another set of doors. On the left was another bedroom, she knew, because it was one her mother had used. Across from it, on Jordan's right was Desi's room. And then another twenty or thirty feet down the hall was Alec's room on the right and another bedroom on the left, the one she had taken Alec and Desi through to watch the Kinos do their morning beach routine.

Finally there at the end of the hall was a huge, really magnificent painting. It was mostly white, because it was trees lining a road, all in blooms of white. Jordan moved closer and studied the painting. The detail of each blossom on the trees was unbelievable. She tried to see the painter's name in the bottom, but it was too dark in the hallway. However, when she looked up above the painting, she saw a brass plate that read, "Spring Dogwoods in Georgia," and then on the next line, "Breez Sheridan Adams." Jordan smiled. This was an exquisite painting. One could almost feel like you could walk among the trees.

Sighing, the pain shot through her again and she turned to walk back toward her end of the hall, but decided to go in the room across from Alec's. She stepped in, turned on the light, and took note of the bedspread. It was mostly gray, a thick, quilted possibly silk or satin bedspread. It was inviting.

The bedspread in her own room was white. In Taylor's room was a light blue. In Three's room was a mixture of dark gray and rusty brown. Mrs. Kino had such good taste. To the right of the queen-size bed was another large painting. This one was more of a modern art type deal. It had mostly gray, mixed with swirls of white and some blue and as Jordan studied it she realized it was the ocean. But not like if one was to look out over the ocean, but as if one was in the water and a storm had brought the waves up around you, surrounding you. It had movement and emotion. She looked down at the signature. June Flower Kino. It was impressive.

Jordan turned to head toward the balcony doors, thinking to go out and stare at the ocean for a while. But then she remembered that the doors and windows were monitored and if someone went out security would notify Mr. Kino. Sighing, she turned back toward the room. In the front corner was a window and a setting of two comfy-looking upholstered chairs and a small round coffee table in front. What was on the table caught her eye. It was a silver tray with two glasses and a fancy looking bottle of something. Maybe whiskey, or bourbon, or rum, some kind of amber colored liquid.

She lifted it to examine it closely. There was a giant deer head with large antlers on the front. The label read, "*The Dalmore Port Wood Reserve, Highland Single Malt Scotch Whisky*." The bottle was so pretty, it almost looked like a bottle of cologne rather than whiskey. She wondered if it was really whiskey or just for show, like, with water and food coloring. It was already used, like about a third of it was gone. She twisted off the cap and smelled. Oh, it was definitely real. Then she got the idea that a glass of this stuff might take away the pain in her leg, so she sat down on one of the chairs and poured some of the whiskey into one of the glasses.

Lifting it to her nose, she sniffed and made a face, then took a tiny sip. It

kind of burned as it went down. She sipped again, a larger one this time, and made a face, wondering how people could ever think that this stuff tasted good. But she was getting a nice, warm feeling. She threw back the rest of what was in her glass and poured herself another, this time filling the glass.

✝✝✝

Young Eric woke with the 3:00 AM alarm he'd set to give Jordan another pain pill. He pulled on some jeans, grabbed up the bottle and headed to her room. He stopped short when he saw she wasn't in bed or in the bathroom, and his heart started to beat faster.

He ran down the stairs and searched for her but she was nowhere to be found. Pulling out his phone, he checked with security to make sure no one had breached a door or window and they assured him that no one had. He searched the lower level of the home, though he didn't think she'd brave a second flight of stairs, re-searched the main level and went back upstairs and looked in her room again. He came out and looked down the hall, and saw light coming from under the last door on the left. Breathing a sigh of relief, he went down the hall. As he got closer, he heard her singing, "I got friends in low places..." He entered the room. What he found surprised him.

"Hey Three!" Jordan said loudly when he came into the room.

His brows rose. "Hello, Jordan." He put a finger to his lips. "What in the world are you doing?"

She giggled. "I'm singing."

"Oh, is that what you call it?"

"Yes. Yes I do." She tilted her glass up and downed what was in it.

He took the glass from her hand. "And that is enough of that." He set the glass down and lifted the bottle. He wasn't sure how much had been in it. "Um, Jordan, how many glasses have you had of this stuff?"

She laughed. "I'm not sure. Two, three, maybe more, maybe less."

He blew out a breath. "Babe, why are you in this room drinking whiskey?"

She shrugged. "I was in a lot of pain, I mean, a LOT. And I was afraid to go downstairs to get my pain pills, cuz, ya know, like, because, well, I can't get back up. So, I decided to take a walk because I was restless, and lookie what I found!"

He smiled.

She smiled back. "I missed you, Three. You didn't come back to me."

"Yes I did, but you were sound asleep, and I didn't want to wake you."

"Oh," she said with a cute pout. "Well, I missed you and I felt all alone."

"I'm sorry."

"Three," she said with a bright smile. "Three, would you like to make love to me?"

He chuckled. "Yes, Jordan, yes I would, but this is not the right time or place." He looked her over. She was sitting in one chair, her leg propped up on the other chair. He knelt down in front of her. "Let's get you back to bed."

"Will you sleep with me?" she asked loudly.

He put a finger to his lips. "Shhh, Jordan. You're gonna wake Alec."

She giggled. "Ya gotta know that Alec duzzn sleep in his own room. He sleeps with Desi."

Eric smiled and nodded.

Jordan sighed. "Aren't they just the cutest? They're so in love."

"Yep," he agreed quickly and he pulled Jordan to her feet.

"How much do you wanna bet that he's told Desi, 'you are my Destiny,' ya know because like, that's her real name."

Young Eric chuckled. "I bet he's said that many times."

"You could say that to me, but that wouldn't work for me because my name is not Destiny. You'd have to say, 'you are my Jordan-ny, and that doesn't make much sense at all, now does it?"

He gave a short laugh as he lifted her into his arms. "Well, babe, you are my destiny for sure."

"No I'm not. I'm your Jordan-ny."

"Okay, you are my Jordanee."

She frowned. "My name doesn't mean anything."

"Shhh, let's not wake the house. And yes it does. Your name is biblical."

She laughed. "Bilical? Bibilal? What did you say?"

"Biblical. From the Bible. Keep your voice down please."

"I'm in the Bible?" she whispered loudly.

"Yes," he said softly as he carried her down the hall and into her bedroom.

"What am I in the Bible?"

"Well, Jordan is the name of the river where John the Baptist baptized Jesus and a whole bunch of other people, and it's the place where the Israelites crossed over into the promised land. So, your name is significant. In a way, Jordan, you are my own personal river of life."

"I'm your river of life?"

"You are indeed. Well, right after Jesus," he said as he set her down on the bed. "Be right back."

He quickly went back to the room. Closed up the whiskey bottle, grabbed up her crutches, turned off the light and headed back to Jordan's room, just as there was a loud thump. He entered Jordan's bedroom and walked to the other side of the bed, and there was Jordan on the floor.

"Oh, baby, did you fall out of bed?"

She giggled. "I suppose I did."

He knelt down beside her. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think I am."

"Eric?"

He rose at the sound of his father's voice. "Yes, sir."

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, sir, sorry we woke you. Jordan fell out of bed."

"Is she hurt?"

"I don't think so."

"What's that smell?"

"You're probably smelling the whiskey."

"You're drinking whiskey?"

Young Eric frowned. "Really?" He shook his head, bent down, picked Jordan up and put her back in bed.

She looked over at the person standing in the doorway. "Oh, hey, Mr. Kino! How nice for you to come visit!"

Ricky's lips twitched. "Well, hello there, Jordan. So, you decided to tie one on, huh?"

"She was in pain and found a bottle of whiskey in the gray room."

Ricky smiled. "That bottle of whiskey has been there at least a year. Toby and Caroline received it as a gift from some fan when they were here and they left it behind. Your mom saved it because she thought the bottle was so, uh, cute, I think was her word."

"Oh, it is cute," Jordan said. "It has like, this big deer on it, and it's like kinda round and stuff."

Ricky nodded. "Yep, round and stuff, now I understand." He looked at Eric. "I thought you brought her pain pills up with you so you could give her one."

"I did. And I set my alarm to give her one at three. But apparently, she woke up earlier in pain and went exploring."

"Mr. Kino, did you know that I am billical?"

He grinned. "Billical? Do you mean, biblical?"

"That's what I said," she said with a pout.

"Okay, I'll bite. How are you biblical?"

"I'll give you a teeny weeny hint."

"Okay."

"It's my name."

Ricky smiled. "You are the Jordan river, where people were born again."

"That's right, oh my gosh you are all so smart!" she said loudly.

Both Ricky and Eric chuckled.

"So, you think she's not hurt?" Ricky asked.

Young Eric shrugged. "I mean, she's wasted, so it's hard to tell."

Ricky smiled. "Yep, it's hard to tell when she's not registering pain. But listen, give your Aunt Jeffy a call. Jordan has a concussion and with her drinking, Jeffy might want you to monitor her more closely. I'm absolutely sure she'll tell you to not give Jordan any more pain pills until the alcohol is out of her system."

"I'll call her."

Ricky nodded at Eric. "Well son, this has been entertaining, but I'm gonna go back to bed. You got this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Try to get some rest. You gotta spar tomorrow."

"I will. Night, Dad."

"Good night, son." He left and closed the door.

Jordan sighed softly. "Your dad is so nice."

"Yeah he is."

"My dad is dead."

He sighed. "I know. I'm sorry." He ran his hand over her hair. "So, are you sure you're not hurt?"

She shrugged. "I don't think so."

He looked her over. "Hey, I just noticed that Jeffy took the bandages off your arms."

She smiled and held her arms out. He lifted one to look closely at it. It was covered in scratches and abrasions, but already looked to be healing. "It looks better," he finally said.

She nodded and then quickly pulled her shirt over her head.

"Whoa, babe, what are you doing?"

"I wanna show you all my boo boos."

He drew a patient breath.

She put her hand on her neck. "Just look at all this on my neck and my chest. Those aren't just scratches, Three. Those are his hand prints on my neck. And this is from his fingernails clawing at me."

He forced his eyes to move from the pink lacy bra to the claw marks on her chest and neck. Then lower, to more claw marks on her stomach. She started to pull her sweats off.

"Wait. Now what are you doing?"

"I wanna show you my knee."

"We'll look at that one later, okay?"

She shrugged. "Okay."

He noticed a bruise on the back of her shoulder. "Lean forward, I wanna look at your back."

She bent over.

"Good grief, Jordan," he muttered. "You have dozens of little bruises all over your back."

"Oh yeah, that. I can't feel them. Dr. Kino says it's from the sharp rocks I was lying on when he was choking me."

He ran his hand gently over her back. "Baby, I am so sorry."

"Three," she said softly, looking up into his eyes. She drew a deep breath. "He's gonna get out, isn't he?"

"What? No. Absolutely not."

"The detectives said there's a possibility," she said as her eyes filled.

"I heard what the detectives said. They also said bail would be waay up there, so if they allow it, I doubt he'll be able to make bail. He doesn't have any money. He was at school on student loans and he has no resources."

"Then why do I feel so scared?"

"Don't be afraid, Jordan."

She started to cry. "I can't help it. I'm so afraid. I can't do this anymore. I can't keep worrying that someone is gonna get me. I thought all of that was over and now, here I am again."

"You are not in the same place."

"I'm the only one of his victims who saw his face. The only one that can identify him."

"Wrong. I mean, you're the only one that saw his face, yes, but the other victims have forensic DNA evidence that can and probably will be matched to him, so that means that even without your testimony, he's goin' down."

She reached out and grabbed his hand. "Please don't leave me, Three. Please just stay with me forever. I'm so scared."

"Okay, Jordan, now listen. Some of this is just the alcohol talkin', so having this discussion right now is futile. You're not thinking clearly. I *will* tell you this. I absolutely intend to stay with you forever. Forever. But there *will* be times that I can't be at your side."

When she continued to cry he realized he was getting nowhere, so instead he helped her put her shirt back on, elevated her foot, covered her up, pulled his phone from his pocket and placed it on the table, turned off the light, unbuttoned his jeans and got into bed beside her. Then he pulled her close and looked into her eyes. "I've got you, babe."

She sniffed and blinked up at him. He lowered his head and kissed her softly several times.

"Will you make love to me?" she asked.

He chuckled. "And we're back to that," he muttered.

"What did you say?"

He sighed. "Nothing, baby. Go to sleep. I need to make a call."

She cuddled up as close as she could get and obeyed.

✝✝✝

October 30th, Wednesday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric hurried up the stairs with a small personal cooler and three bottles of cold water. As soon as he got into Jordan's room he heard her retching in the bathroom. Setting the cooler down next to her side of the bed, he glanced into the bathroom and saw her on her knees in front of the toilet and she just looked pitiful. He headed in and immediately gathered her hair back away from her face.

Placing his hand on her back for support, he murmured comforting words that he was sure weren't helping a bit. When she finished, she laid down on the floor in front of the toilet in the fetal position and simply moaned.

He brushed his hand over the side of her head.

"Don't say anything," she mumbled.

He chuckled. "I wasn't gonna say a thing. But, I do want to ask a question."

She only moaned in response.

"Was it worth it?"

"Shut up," she ordered with no force behind the word.

He bit his lip to keep from laughing. "Jeffy says if you throw up again she's gonna come over and examine you, but she's already done a 'Jeffy' scan and feels like this is all just the Scotch and not your concussion. Okay, so, Jordan, I'm just gonna lift you up so you can stand. I want you to rinse your mouth, brush your teeth, wash the parts of your face that you're allowed to wash and get back into bed. I've brought you a cooler of water because you need to

hydrate. And I'm going back down to get the tea."

"That really yucky tea?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yep, that's the one. It doesn't taste great, but you know it helps a whole lot. Dad said he'll put extra honey in it."

She sighed.

He took her under her arms and lifted her to her feet. Then lifted her again and moved her to the sink. "There. Get to it. I'll be right back."

Jordan did as she'd been asked to do and was just making her way to the bed when young Eric came back into the room, carrying a mug of tea.

He set the tea down on the bedside table, smiled kindly at his girl and helped her get comfortable in the bed, her back against the headboard so she could sit up. Then he handed her the tea.

Sighing she accepted it, smelled it, made a face, which made him smile and finally, she took a sip.

He watched her for a few minutes and she looked up at him.

"What?" she said.

He shook his head. "What, what? I'm just watching you."

"And thinking what an idiot I am?"

"Nope. Thinking how much I love you and how our life together is not gonna be boring at all."

"Our life together?"

"Guess I'm moving too fast in my head."

She smiled.

"Okay, well, you know, I have to go."

She nodded.

He moved close, bent over and kissed her. "Try to have a good day."

"You too."

"Oh my day is gonna be great. I'm sparring today. Might be the last sparring day before the Challenge."

"Well, I guess I should say, 'kick butt,' Three."

He grinned. "Thanks, my little river."

She giggled.

"You remember that?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, I remember every stupid thing I said."

Eric stopped and pulled his phone from his pocket when he got a text. He read it and looked up with a smile.

"Granddad wants to know if you'll agree to come up to the studio and have lunch and a counseling session with him today. He says you can stay and watch the sparring."

She smiled a beautiful smile. "I would love to do that."

"Good. But I don't want you driving. I'm sure Mom will bring you, but if not, I'll get an agent. Just be sure to drink that tea and hydrate. See you at lunch." He kissed her again.

✝✝✝

Same day, Kino Martial Arts, Newport, California

Grandmaster Kino looked Jordan over as she came into the studio on crutches. Her face was scabbing over on her forehead, nose, chin and cheeks, and a few scabs on her neck, more on her arms.

He shook his head. He'd seen the pics. He'd seen the video. But her appearance was still shocking. He watched her face light up though, as young Eric came to greet her. She looked up at his grandson with adoring eyes, with complete trust. She smiled at the young man as if she hadn't seen him in weeks. He took her hands, brought them to his mouth and kissed her fingertips, and he had the same adoring look in his eyes. Eric Sr. smiled. Those two were definitely in love, and it made him proud to see young Eric acting like a man, taking care of and protecting his girl. Eric had already spoken to his grandson about the guilt he was feeling for not being there for her when she needed him. Though it wasn't logical, young Eric still had to work his way through those feelings, and thoughts of, 'if only I'd been there.' But one can't live their lives in regret and 'what-ifs' and 'if-onlys.'

These two kids had been through a lot lately. God was honing them into strong warriors. But today, after the dream he'd had last night, and from what Ricky said this morning, Jordan needed some help, and Eric was happy to provide that help. He was happy he was still here, to serve his family and the world in any way God would have him serve.

Eric smiled compassionately at Jordan as he approached her.

She smiled at him politely. "Hey, Grandmaster Kino. It's nice to see you."

"It's good to see you too, Jordan."

"Thank you for making time for me, and also for like, reaching out to me for this meeting. I mean, you always go above and beyond."

He smiled. "I initiated the meeting because I try to do what God asks me to do, and He gave me a dream last night, about you. He loves you and wants me to help you."

Jordan smiled. "Wow. So, He knows who I am?"

"He does."

"He's like, real, isn't he?"

Young Eric smiled at her words.

Eric senior also smiled. "He is indeed. But there are so many things to talk about in what you just said. Let's grab some lunch and go into the conference room. We need to get to it, because I only have an hour."

She nodded and they turned toward the table. Young Eric grabbed two plates and loaded them with paper-wrapped sub sandwiches, quinoa chips, and a tangerine. "Anything else you guys want?" he asked.

"No, that's plenty," Jordan said.

"Granddad?"

"What she said," he replied as he grabbed up a couple bottles of cold water and some napkins.

Young Eric carried their plates for them into the conference room and set them at a table.

"If you need anything else, call me," young Eric said as he kissed Jordan's

cheek and left them.

Eric senior smiled at Jordan. "Would you like to say the blessing?"

She shook her head. "No, I want you to say it."

He nodded, bowed his head and blessed the food. He added a blessing on their counseling session and on Jordan herself.

They unwrapped their sandwiches and took a bite. Eric watched her silently for a moment or two.

"So, let me go back to what you said a few minutes ago," he began. "You seemed surprised that our Father in heaven knows who you are, that He knows about you."

She nodded. "I mean, like, there are billions of people on the earth, right? And there were billions who have already died since the beginning of time. And I'm just one little person, how in the world could He even know I exist?"

Eric nodded. "It's hard to wrap your brain around it, isn't it? How could He know each of us? Well, He knows each and every one of His own children. He's omniscient. He created everything. How He did that, we don't understand yet. We have a veil over our minds in this world. But that veil gets thinner as we develop a real relationship with Him through prayer, and listening, and more prayer and more listening and don't leave out obedience to His laws and commandments."

When she frowned he went on. "Sometimes it helps to understand if we compare God's kingdom to our own little kingdoms here on Earth."

"What do you mean, our own little kingdoms? I have no kingdom," she said with a laugh.

"Yes, you do. Well, sort of. You see, what we have here is like a mini replica. There was Adam and Eve, and they created a family. And so forth through the ages. All the way down to our family. There was Ann and I, she's my first wife."

Jordan nodded, because she knew of Ann.

"And now there's Shelley and I. And we have Ricky and Bree and Mark and Joey and Jeffy, and they all married and created young Eric and Taylor and JoJo and Em, and Phia, and Kel and Ledger, and Mark adopted Logan into his kingdom, and each of our children brought wives or husbands into the family, and Shelley and I now have five more lovely, amazing spirits, Nate, Noah, Abe, Angelina and Manny. Do I remember every single one of these people?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"I do, and I know them each personally, and I have a relationship with each of them. They are my little kingdom. My replica of God's universe. When I was younger, I provided these people with a home, but then they ventured out, 'into the world,' and began to create their own world, their own homes, their own little kingdoms, yet still, they all belong to me, not in a possessive way, but in that they are a part of me. I care for them all. I love them all. I won't forget them. And if they ever need me, I'll be there for them. The only way I wouldn't, is if they turned their backs on me and didn't want me in their lives anymore, which would make me very sad, because I love them so much, and

I would do anything to help them. So, do you see how we can sort of begin to understand how God can love each and every single one of us?"

Jordan nodded.

Eric went on. "So, not only does God know who you are, but He loves you, He wants you to have a relationship with Him and when you start to pray, and listen and pray and listen, you will begin to hear His voice. And Jordan, He has heard you pray, because he gave me a dream about you. He sent me to you, to help you. And I love doing God's work, whatever He wants me to do, and talking to you, helping you, is a really awesome job, because I love you too."

She smiled and looked down.

"Now, when you said earlier, 'He's real, isn't He?' I'm curious, why did you say that?"

"Because, I thought I heard something that night. I mean, Jesus spoke to me when the guy was choking me."

Eric nodded and smiled. "Really? What did He say?"

"He said, 'Not yet.'"

"Okay, so, do you remember what you were thinking about when He said that?"

She nodded. "Yes, I was thinking that 'I'm gonna die' and 'I'm about to meet Jesus'."

Eric smiled. "And He told you, 'not yet.' Aww, Jordan, that is a beautiful thing. That means He was right there with you, with you as that was happening to you. He was letting you know that you won't die, and that's usually because you have more work to do in this world before God calls you home."

She blinked up at him.

"So, let's think a minute about why God would allow you, one of his children, to be attacked like that."

She was quiet as she took another bite of her sandwich. Finally she looked up at Grandmaster Kino. "Oh, are you asking me, or are you gonna tell me the answer to that?"

He chuckled. "I could tell you the answer, but I think you know it, so I'd rather you tell me."

She shook her head as she thought. Then suddenly looked up. "I told my friends yesterday that I was glad it was me and not them."

He nodded. "You're on the right track, go on."

"So, because it was me, and there were cameras around, he got caught."

"Keep going."

"And if not for me, he wouldn't have been caught, and he'd still be hurting more girls, ruining their lives, and maybe even killing them, because, he lost control and almost killed me, so he maybe could have done that, lost control and killed them."

"And so...."

"And so, I'm glad it was me and not like, Colton."

"You're still missing the point."

She blew out a breath.

"You, Jordan, fought valiantly with a violent criminal. You took a beating, yes, but it's because of you being where you were that got this guy caught. Sometimes it seems like there's no good reason for something bad to happen to us. We don't deserve this, we think. But it has nothing to do with what we deserve. It's all for a reason. Maybe, if it'd been Colton and not you, maybe he would have killed her. But you, you're a warrior, you fought hard, and kept him there so that the cameras picked up his image perfectly."

"So, you're saying, God used me to catch the guy? But why couldn't He just wave his arm and..." She stopped smiled, remembering she'd used those words before. She nodded. "He DID wave His arm, right? He waved it and I lived, and the bad guy got caught, and those people came by and scared him off at just the right time. God could wave His arm and make it easier, but what good would that do? We don't get strong if it's easy. Right?"

Eric couldn't contain his joy and smiled at the beautiful girl. "Right. Very good, Jordan. And God chose you, because you are one of His warriors. He prepared you, and when evil also chose you, you were strong and ready, though you may not think so. But what you did, how you fought, it was a hard thing, and you *WERE* strong. God can turn evil into good when His warriors do hard things. You have—we all have—a plan for our lives. A purpose."

"What is my purpose?"

"Your purpose, God's will for you, His plan for you, is between you and Him. You have to discover that for yourself. Still, he gave me a dream last night, and I absolutely know that you are one of God's chosen warriors."

"May I ask you to tell me what you dreamed? Or is it too personal?"

He smiled. "I was wondering if you were ever gonna ask."

She shrugged. "Sometimes I'm a little slow."

"I think more like, too polite. I saw you, first in a suit of armor. Then that morphed into you sitting with a baby, and you had a head covering, like one always sees on the Virgin Mary. And then I saw you much like you are now, all scratched up and battle weary. Then I saw you heal, and then I saw you scratched up again. It went back and forth several times. Next I saw you standing in front of a long line of girls, some young, some older, they came to you where you stood by a gate, and you allowed them to come in the gate and then you closed it soundly. It made a big boom when you closed it. After that, you morphed back into looking exactly like you look right now, but you were running away, looking back over your shoulder in fear, like someone was chasing you."

He sighed. "When I woke from the dream I knew immediately what the problem was, and knew God showed me that dream to have me help you with the problem."

"Okay, so, what's my problem?"

He smiled. "Not so fast, young lady. Let's go through the whole dream. First, you in the armor. That seems fairly obvious to me. As I've already said, you are one of God's warriors. He needs you to be a warrior. He needs you to fight for others. He needs and wants you to put on the 'whole armor of God'

on a daily basis."

She sighed. "I really don't know how to fight."

"Well, if you're speaking of physically fighting, you've become a member of a family that definitely knows how to fight and could easily teach you if you want to learn. But that's not necessarily the kind of fight I'm speaking of. You've been fighting a long time now. You've been fighting since your father died and your mother married Perez. You fought like a champ when you were fourteen and you've been doing it ever since. You fought to protect your siblings. You fought to get that scholarship. You've been fighting to keep that scholarship."

"Maybe I'm tired of fighting."

Eric nodded. "That's understandable. So God sent you rest, in the form of a strong young man, who can fight for you."

Jordan smiled, thinking of that young man and her heart swelled to overflowing. Her eyes moistened.

Eric smiled at her.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping at her eyes. "I just love him so much."

"I know you do. It's quite evident." He picked up his phone and glanced at the time. "We'd better get back to the dream and finish up before we run out of time. The next part, the baby and the head scarf, means you are a nurturer, a mother figure."

"Me?"

He smiled. "It's clear even in what you said to your friends. You were glad it was you and not them. That's how a mother would think. Loving and protective. And then I saw you all banged up and healed and banged up and healed, and I think that means you have many battles to fight."

"Oh, great," she muttered.

Eric chuckled. "God wouldn't give you anything that you can't handle. So, do you go forth dreading each day, or do you cheerfully pick up your cross and carry the burden? Do you tell God, 'please no more work for me,' or do you tell Him, 'bring it on'?"

She nodded. "Well, I guess I buck up and tell Him to bring it on."

"That's because you're a warrior. It comes naturally to you." He paused, then went on. "Next, standing at the gate with the long line of girls and women you were ushering inside. My interpretation of that is you were offering them sanctuary. You were putting them safely inside the gate and guarding the gate. You were protecting them. This might not be exactly what God meant, you should pray about it. But I think it's pretty close."

Jordan nodded.

"And then the last part of the dream, you were running in fear, looking behind you in terror. That also seems pretty obvious to me. You're afraid. So, tell me, Jordan, what are you afraid of?"

She looked down, thinking. "When I learned that this guy might get out on bail, it terrified me. With Peter, I was always looking over my shoulder, wondering if he would get to me and then it seemed like the same thing was

happening with this rapist guy."

Eric nodded. "It seemed like the same thing was happening and it triggered the fear. But Jordan, it's not the same at all. First, I'm almost positive that he won't be getting out on bail. But let's say they set bail and then somehow he finds the money and gets out. He'd have to wear an ankle monitor. Even then, we wouldn't depend solely on the state to do their job. We'd have an agent monitor him 24/7 and, we'd have an agent with you 24/7. We won't let him get to you. But Jordan, he's not getting out. Justin is monitoring the situation. Garrett Clark is sitting in jail, and will remain there until trial."

Jordan nodded. "That's his name? I never thought to ask his name. Gosh, I think he's in a few of my classes."

"Evil is everywhere."

"Will I have to testify?"

"I believe you will, if you want to make sure he stays behind bars for the rest of his life. Does that upset you?"

She sighed. "I guess not. Three said my testimony wasn't the only one. He said even without my testimony they still will have DNA evidence from all the other people that he assaulted."

"He's right. But I'm sure what he was trying to tell you, was there would be no reason for this Clark kid to come after you to silence you because it wouldn't help him. He's finished. And that's because of you, Jordan. I'm thinking maybe you could meet up with the other victims, because they are probably struggling, and I bet you could help pull them out of their funk."

She nodded. "I could do that. I'd like to be able to help them."

"If you'd like, I'll arrange it."

Jordan nodded. "Yes, that would be good, but, I won't know what to say."

"Just say what's in your heart. Help them to be strong, just like you are being strong."

"Okay. I can do that."

"I know you can. I'm so proud of you." He closed his eyes briefly and nodded his head, then smiled at the beautiful young lady. "Jordan, because you're one of God's warriors, apparently, a very important, a very special one, God is nudging me to help you get stronger, so that fear doesn't control you. You have to be strong not only physically, but mentally and spiritually. When your foot heals, I'd like to train you. We can rehab you for softball, and then go above and beyond and train you."

"You mean, like what Three does? I could never do that."

Eric smiled. "No, you can't, as long as you think that. But ask my wife if you can be trained to be the very best."

"Because she was a MART champion, right?"

"Right. And I trained her. And when I first started training her she'd never sparred in a tournament. A year later, she won the MART. I won't be training you for the MART. Just to make you strong and confident. But no pressure, Jordan. This is only if you want me to."

She nodded. "But there is pressure, sir. I mean, if I told someone that

Grandmaster Kino of Kino Martial Arts, father of Ricky Kino, offered to train me personally and I turned him down, I'd never hear the end of it. Especially from my own little brother. Not to mention the guy I'm in love with."

Eric smiled. "Well, if you turn me down, I guess that's a cross you'd have to bear. Just know that *I* would have no ill feelings about you turning me down. I understand your trepidation."

She nodded. "It would be awesome to get strong and to feel confident instead of how I feel right now."

"How do you feel right now?"

"Scared. Weak. Like I don't want to be alone. Like I want Three to be with me at all times. Like I'm scared of my own shadow and like I'm gonna jump out of my skin. But I'm trying to not show that to people, because like," she chuckled. "I've always hated crying, weepy, weak, simpering females who can't stand on their own two feet, and now, here I am, being just that."

"Well, don't be too hard on yourself. You were brutally attacked less than forty-eight hours ago. It usually takes some time to overcome the emotions that rise up after something like that. As the days pass you'll regain strength and confidence. I predict that even a week from now, you'll be surprised at your progress. You won't feel so afraid. You'll start to regain your confidence. And also, being in that cast, unable to walk, makes you feel vulnerable. You'll feel a lot better once your foot heals."

She smiled. "I hope so."

"Now, just one more thing. About softball, Ricky says you haven't lost your scholarship yet. The coaches are gonna allow you to recover and see if you can get back to the star pitcher you were. Jeffy and I will be happy to help you rehab. But you also will have to keep up your studies and I know you've missed classes this week. So, get your head on straight. Get focused. And let's get you all caught up. And you have a new agent assigned to you to get you to all of your classes—Agent Wyatt."

She frowned.

Eric smiled. "We know you've grown attached to Agent Trout, but he's been promoted to Senior Lead Agent and has other duties. But Agent Wyatt is a good man."

She nodded. "I know him. He and Agent Brown watched over Josie and Jamie." She sighed. "I'm sorry I'm costing you guys so much money having to pay for these agents."

Eric frowned. "We take care of our own. The money is nothing. A simple tool God has given us to do His good works."

They looked up at the knock on the door and young Eric poked his head in. "Um, sorry to interrupt, but like, some people here are chomping at the bit to kick my butt and it's 1:15."

"Oh, sorry, Eric. We're on our way right now," he said as he rose, as did Jordan. "You are gonna set these people down, correct?"

Young Eric grinned. "Oh absolutely. Let's do this."

✝✝✝

Ephesians 2:10
"For we are his workmanship,
created in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand,
that we should walk in them."

Chapter Eleven

"Yes!" The word was uttered loudly, and with fierceness, and with the pump of a fist. Gabe Tanner was so filled with pride for young Eric that he couldn't contain himself. Young Eric had just put down his second opponent of the day. Both had been 6th Dans. Both were approximately the same age and weight of the men young Eric would face a week from Saturday. One more round and he'd move to fight his toughest competitor, the current Kino Challenge Champion, his uncle, Joey Adams.

Joey was a 7th Dan. It would be the telling match. Is Eric ready for the Challenge or not? Does being only a 3rd Dan put him at a disadvantage? Is his being so young a disadvantage? Will his abduction play a part in how he fights? Gabe glanced over at Joey as he stretched out. Just looking at Joey, he was formidable. He was thirty-eight years old. His physique was rock-hard. He was known for his incredible speed. His skill was almost unbeatable. The only people known to give him competition were Ricky and Mark, and Gabe wasn't sure if they could still do that. Now, young Eric was rising up and it was very exciting and very cool.

Gabe glanced over at Jordan, curious to see the admiration in her eyes, because she didn't hide her emotions well and he loved seeing how much she adored her boyfriend. But she wasn't smiling. She was not only frowning, she was grimacing. He rose from where he sat on the floor. He had to move through several rows of people to get to her. The large studio was filled to capacity. Many honored Kino students had been invited to watch today's proceedings, plus the families of those chosen to spar today against both Gabe and young Eric.

He approached Jordan and knelt quietly down in front of her. "Hey, Jordan. Are you okay?"

She looked at the handsome young man and shook her head. "Gabe, I don't feel so good."

"What's goin' on? I mean, how bad do you feel? Get you to the hospital bad? Or, you need an aspirin bad?"

She smiled. "How about I need thirty aspirins bad?"

"So, you're in pain." He sighed.

"I didn't think to bring the pain pills with me. I haven't been thinking very clearly lately."

"Gee, I wonder why."

"If I could just elevate my leg, it would help."

He nodded, looked around. There were too many people where she was

sitting. "Okay, let's get you moved over there, closer to the door where there's some room and I'll fix you up."

He handed her the crutches that were leaning against the wall beside her, helped her stand, folded her chair and lifted it and started clearing the way, mumbling, "excuse me, excuse me, excuse us, comin' through."

He finally sat her down in the area he'd had an eye on then went to find another chair. He finally had to grab one from the conference room, placed it in front of her, lifted her foot and carefully placed it on the chair. He shook his head. He didn't like the looks of it and disappeared again as he went to search for something else. He came back with his own bag, put the sports bag on the chair and lifted her leg up onto it. He nodded. "How's that?"

She sighed. "Much better. Thanks, Gabe."

He grinned. "We're not done yet." He pulled out his phone and texted Dr. Kino very quickly, waited for a reply and then headed straight to a woman, knelt down in front of her and spoke to her, motioning toward Jordan. The woman shook her head. He went to the next. Finally, a woman nodded, bent down, pulled her purse from under the chair, took out a bottle of ibuprofen, and shook some pills into his hand. Then he ran to grab a bottle of water from the cooler and brought it back to her. "This is ibuprofen. Dr. Kino said it will take the edge off. She said they're 200 milligrams and the dose is two pills, but you can take up to 800 milligrams now, or save two for later."

Jordan held her hand out, he put the pills in her palm and she threw back all four and drank some water.

He smiled. "Okay then. So, do you need anything else?"

She shook her head. "Thanks, Gabe. You're so sweet."

"Yeah, that's what they all say."

She giggled.

He placed a hand on her head. "Father, ease her pain, in Jesus' name, amen," he whispered.

She blinked up at him. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. Gotta go, Eric's about to fight Agent Adams, and it's gonna be awesome."

He headed back to where he'd been sitting on the floor.

She watched him sit down and act like he hadn't just done something lovely. Three says Gabe is full of light. She could see that. He's kind of like a grown man and a little kid in the same body.

Both Gabe and Jordan had missed the last round of Three's sparring the last guy. But now, Three was gearing up to spar Joey Adams, his own uncle. Three was resting, drinking water, while Joey was stretching and hopping up and down, shaking out his arms, getting loose. Jordan looked from Three's face, seemingly relaxed, to Grandmaster Kino's face, also relaxed, to Joey's face, also relaxed. So why was she so nervous? Her heart was racing. He needed to do well against Joey if he was gonna do well in the Challenge, and he needed to do well in the Challenge so his movie will do well when it comes out in a month. And she knew Three was worried that he'd be the first one in the

family to ever lose a Challenge. This moment seemed ultra important, but everyone seemed so relaxed.

She drew a deep breath. She wished Mrs. Kino was here, to keep her calm, but she had to go with Desi and Alec to their first visit to the obstetrician. It was then she felt a soft hand on her shoulder. She looked up. It was Breez Adams, Joey's wife. She smiled. "It's gonna be okay."

Jordan nodded. "It just seems like such an important moment."

"Well, it is. But they all have their priorities straight and they all practice 'let go and let God,' and they do it well."

"Let go and let God," Jordan murmured. "Okay." She nodded. Drew a deep breath. "So, whatever will be, will be."

"Pretty much. My Joey will give it his all, because that's the only thing that will help young Eric. And Eric will give his all because he wants to do well. And really, that's all they can do, right? Why worry about the outcome?"

Jordan nodded and sat up straight as the two men walked to the middle of the mat.

"Joey, don't hold back," Grandmaster Kino ordered.

Joey nodded.

"Eric, you know what I told you."

Eric nodded.

"What'd you tell him," Joey asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know," young Eric quipped.

Everyone laughed.

Grandmaster Kino stepped back and Master Foreman stepped forward. "Okay guys. What I say goes. The only difference between this match and the one Saturday week, is young Eric has on head protection. Fight like it's real."

Joey held out his hand. "Love you, Eric."

Young Eric grinned and shook hands. "Love you, too, Uncle Joey, now stop trying to get in my head."

The crowd laughed again.

"Bow, to me," Master Foreman commanded.

They did.

"Bow to each other."

They did.

"Fight."

They did. Young Eric allowed Joey to come at him, blocking like his life depended on it, which, in some ways, it did. Joey was known for his speed, but young Eric was handling it beautifully, dodging or blocking every punch, every kick, being patient and waiting for his opening. He saw it, he took it, but Joey also saw it and blocked. Joey blocked everything that young Eric threw at him. This went back and forth the whole round and when the time was called the two received a giant ovation and whistles. They went to their corners.

Jason spoke to Joey, giving him pointers, telling him what he may not be seeing for himself.

Grandmaster Kino spoke quietly to young Eric. Had him breathe deeply,

drink some water, gave him a sequence and sent him back out.

Second round began like the first had, but this time, young Eric went with the sequence Grandmaster Kino had just given him, and surprised Joey with a roundhouse to the face right at the moment Joey had thrown a spinning back. The kick caught Joey off-balance, landed solidly against his cheek, whipping his head around and sending him down. Young Eric went after the downed man, but Joey rolled, kicked up and grabbed young Eric between his thighs and brought Eric down too. They rolled together, over and over and finally both let go and jumped to their feet. The crowd went crazy.

The rest of the round was nothing more than a series of blocks, performed well by both men.

When Three had connected with Joey and sent him down, Jordan's heart thrilled. It was happening. Three kept saying he'd eventually get good enough to put his uncle down, and he'd done it. That meant, the Challenge was at least doable. She clapped hard and yelled for her guy.

The second round ended and Grandmaster Kino whispered into young Eric's ear. Jordan wondered what kind of instruction he was giving him. It was an amazing skill to be able to watch two fighters moving as fast as these two and be able to tell them what to do, what not to do, and figure out how to win. She wondered whether in this third and final round they would simply let time wind down, or try to win.

The round began, and it was obvious, they would try to win. Joey came at young Eric with everything. But Eric's focus was phenomenal. His speed seemed to equal Joey's. He blocked and dodged, and kicked and punched. Joey finally connected powerfully with Eric's midsection and knocked him down, but he sprang back up before Joey was able to take advantage. Young Eric threw several punches, all blocked, but then came with a series of kicks, then switched, ending with an uppercut, and caught Joey's chin. The crowd went crazy again, however, Joey didn't go down. They went back and forth again, kicking, blocking, punching, blocking, and right at the end, Eric spun and kicked Joey in the back, knocking him off-balance and sending him down briefly. He jumped back up, threw a few punches, and the round ended.

Joey, sweating profusely, smiled and nodded at young Eric. "Boy, you are freakin' gonna kick some butt."

Young Eric tried to catch his breath, but was breathing too hard to speak and simply nodded and threw himself into his uncle's arms. They hugged a long time and Joey rubbed his knuckles over his nephew's head while the crowd of Kino students gave them a standing ovation. Jordan had to stand in order to see, so she moved her foot off Gabe's bag and lowered it gingerly to the floor and got to her feet.

She felt the relief Three must be feeling. He'd done well against his uncle, against the current Challenge Champion. That meant he'd do well Saturday week. Jordan watched as Master Foreman went to the doors, unlocked them and allowed several reporters with their cameramen into the studio. There was now gonna be a press conference.

Jordan was in pain again because she was standing, so she sat back down and put her foot back up. Some of the crowd was leaving, while others milled around conversing with other students. Jordan watched Shelley Kino approach her husband. They were so sweet to watch. He smiled at her and put his arms around her. She stood on her toes and kissed him quickly, then spoke to him. Jordan figured she was telling him what a good teacher he was. She would know, since he made her a MART champion way back when they first met.

Ricky Kino was nodding and laughing and speaking with his son, obviously proud of what he'd just done. Ricky had helped coach him these past few weeks. Well, to be real, he'd actually coached him his whole life. Ricky had trained Three since he was old enough to walk, she'd been told. So, he deserved credit too, for what Three had achieved.

She glanced over at her boyfriend. Three was using a towel to dry his face and head, then ran his hand through his thick, dark hair. Lord, he was beautiful, she thought. He was smiling, flashing that bright, white smile, and accepting congratulatory handshakes and pats on the back, and they were all getting ready to be interviewed by the reporters.

Jordan turned to watch Breez Adams hug her husband. He didn't actually lose the fight. But he didn't win either. And that was as it should be, Jordan thought. It was like the circle of life. One grows older and the young ones emerge and take their rightful place.

The crowd had pretty much dissipated and Grandmaster Kino, Three, Ricky Kino, Gabe Tanner, and Joey Adams stood in front of the cameras. Grandmaster Kino spoke first, saying that they will entertain a few questions from the reporters about the upcoming Challenge and Mini-MART, only. He said they would appreciate it if the reporters would refrain from asking questions about the kidnapping, about their new children and about his and Gabe's experience a few months ago since those subjects are weighty and would require more respect than a few flippantly asked questions.

Jordan tried to listen to the questions and answers. Gabe was, as usual highly entertaining. He's so flippant and so sincere, so confident and so humble, so irreverent and so spiritual all at the same time.

The reporter asked, "So, how's your confidence level, Gabe, going into the Mini-MART, after coming back from, well, you know, what we're not supposed to ask about."

Gabe grinned. "Well, that's a great way to 'not' ask about something. Let's see if I can 'not' tell you the answer," he replied, putting the word 'not' in finger quotes. "If I wasn't confident that I will succeed, I wouldn't allow myself to represent Grandmaster Kino, or my own martial arts Master, Master Appel. It's been a struggle to come back from, well, you know what, and make sure my body can handle the stress, but God has helped me to heal quickly, because of like, you know, when I was in a—coma," he said, whispering the word, "Jesus gave me a hug, and if I was back there in that place right now, he'd probably give me a high five, or at least a fist bump, so, I'm feelin' pretty darn confident."

Everyone chuckled.

Young Eric reached up and ruffled Gabe's hair.

Jordan wanted to hear the rest of the little conference, but the pain in her leg was making her antsy. She had to get up, walk around. She felt closed in, panicked, almost claustrophobic, and she wondered if this was how Three felt when he was in jail. It felt like the walls were closing in on her. Shelley Kino and Breez Adams had already left. They said they had to get back to the children. Jordan walked out toward the foyer area, circling around, looking at the myriad of trophies, pictures and ribbons.

After some time she glanced back into the studio. Three was talking, answering some question. She wished she could hear, but knew she'd be able to see the interview completely on TV in the comfort of the Kinos' den. She was breathing hard and looked back outside. She needed some air, and making a quick decision, she headed out the doors. She could see there was a large group of people out in the parking lot, but she ignored them and went to her left, down the sidewalk alongside of the studio. She could see ahead that there was a small playground/park area on the side lawn of the studio and she headed toward it.

It was slow-going with her crutches and she only got about halfway there when she heard someone call her name.

"Jordan! Jordan Brooks!"

She looked around, but couldn't figure out who had called her name. The only people she could see were the large group out in the parking lot, but now, they all seemed to be looking at her. It seemed the entire group was headed in her direction. She thought it was an optical illusion at first, and then thought she was dizzy and they weren't really headed toward her, not the whole group.

However, they did all get closer and closer to her. She was puzzled at first and then realized they were all also reporters or maybe paparazzi and they all were hurtling questions at her at the same time.

She shook her head at the first one who arrived and shoved a microphone toward her face.

"Jordan, can you tell us about what happened to you Monday night?"

Jordan shook her head.

"We heard you were beaten and raped by a serial rapist."

Jordan looked over at the man who said it, then back to the woman who asked the first question.

"You obviously have been beaten," the first woman said. "Tell us what happened."

"I'm, uh," Jordan drew a deep breath. "I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to talk about it because it's an ongoing case."

"Aw, come on, Miss Brooks. The public deserves to know," another person said loudly.

She looked over at another woman. "I can't say anything. If you'll excuse me," she began, but was cut off by the person who stepped up from the direction she'd been heading.

"Okay," another said. "Don't talk about the rape. Tell us about Eric Kino, the third. How long have you known each other and are you exclusive?"

Jordan didn't know what to say. She only nodded.

"Do you think he still has a chance in hell of winning the Challenge since his abduction?" another called out.

She looked over at the man as if he were crazy. But she knew the Kinos never predicted the outcome, so she didn't respond.

"Jordan, is it true you play softball at UCLA?" a woman asked.

Jordan nodded.

"Jordan, do you now live with Eric at his parents' home?"

She shook her head.

"Jordan, what do you think about your boyfriend killing your stepfather?"

"Jordan! Will you at least tell us what it's like to be included in the Kino family activities?"

"Jordan, have you met the new little Kino children? What do you think about them?"

"Some people say they're not quite right, ya know, mentally."

"What do you think about that?"

Jordan felt like she was gonna pass out as she looked from face to face.

Suddenly, her vision was blocked by a large figure.

"She has no comment."

She breathed a sigh of relief at the masculine voice.

"Eric! How do you think you'll do in the Challenge after having been kidnapped?"

"It has no bearing on the Challenge," he said briefly as he put his arm around Jordan's shoulder and ushered her inside the building.

Once inside he helped her to a chair and knelt down in front of her. "Are you okay?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "I don't even know what was happening. They were all asking really stupid or really personal questions. And they wouldn't let me pass."

He scowled, his lips pressed together. "Yeah, they must feel really powerful to impede the progress of a young girl on crutches, and that pisses me off. They know they have no right to block you. Sometimes they're like vultures gathering around roadkill." He sighed and touched his fingers to her cheek. "Sorry about that."

"Nothing for you to apologize about," she murmured. "I just wanted some air. I didn't realize the parking lot was full of reporters."

"Those were mostly paparazzi," he said. "They can be ruthless. Gabe told me that you're in pain."

She nodded. "I left the pills at home."

"Well, let's get you home and situated."

"Okay. And Three, I have to say, you were awesome today."

He smiled. "I feel good about what I did today, so, thanks."

"Does your Uncle Joey feel bad?"

Eric chuckled. "No, of course not. He's the one who wanted to pass the

torch and now he has."

Gabe approached and handed Jordan a bottle of water. "How's she doin'?"

Eric took the bottle, uncapped it and handed it to Jordan. "The paparazzi had her cornered and were pecking at her eyes, but didn't do any real damage. Hey, brother, thanks for taking care of my girl earlier."

He shrugged. "Ya know, it's just what I do."

Young Eric chuckled. "Ya know what, Gabe, even if you don't end up with my sister, you'll always be my brother."

"The only way I don't end up with Taylor is because Taylor doesn't want me anymore."

"Well," Jordan said softly. "Taylor is a brilliant girl so that won't happen."

"Come on, babe, let's get you home," young Eric said.

✝✝✝

October 30th, Late Afternoon Wednesday

Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jericho Jones glanced to his left as he drove down Main Street and what he saw had him slamming on his brakes. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He pulled his pickup over at the curb and watched.

She was actually doing it right. She had the foot of what looked to be a forty-foot extension ladder up against the building and was walking it upright, rung by rung. Once the ladder was upright against the building, she put her hands on either side of the ladder and looked up at it, then slightly bent her knees, lifted the ladder, stepped backward about six feet and set it back down.

He let out an apprehensive breath. The girl was small. Maybe five and a half feet tall. She was athletic looking. She wore jeans and he could tell she had muscular thighs. That's about all he could tell because she wore a thick, oversized, UGA sweatshirt that came past her hips. Her blond hair was blowing in the brisk, cold wind, and whipping around her face.

He watched as the girl knelt down and lifted the ladder briefly to set the spikes in the grass. She then stepped on the first rung and jumped up and down a few times. He nodded his approval.

The girl then grabbed the rope, pulled, and pushed up on the extension and raised the ladder a few feet. She did it again until it was out of her reach. Then she pulled the rope alone and it went up another short distance and stopped. She jerked on the rope again, but the ladder was stuck. She looked up, pulling on the rope and the ladder started to sway to the left. He jumped from his truck and ran across the street, across the leaf-covered lawn and up behind the girl.

Grabbing the ladder, he steadied it and righted it.

She looked up over her shoulder, a look of surprise on her face.

His breath caught and his heart stopped. He was looking into the most beautiful face he'd ever seen. Staring into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. She raised her eyebrows at him.

He made himself speak. "Uh, hey, I, uh, saw you struggling with this ladder and decided to help."

She made a face. "I wasn't struggling."

He grinned. “Just callin’ it like I see it.”

“Whatever,” she mumbled.

He placed his hand above hers on the rope. “Let me do this, please, before you hurt yourself.”

“Fine,” she said as she let go.

He pulled the rope and finished extending the ladder, made sure it was locked in, then checked the stability and backed away. “There ya go.”

“Thank you,” she said flippantly.

“You’re welcome. So, what do you need the ladder for?”

She pointed at a white scroll lying on the ground. “I was going to hang that banner there up on the front of the building.”

He nodded. “Will you allow me to help you?”

She looked around, instinctively touched the waistband of her jeans, and finally nodded. “Sure, if you’ve got your heart set on it.”

He smiled. “Oh, I really do.” He picked up the large scroll made of vinyl.

Before he could, the girl stepped up onto the ladder.

“You hand me that and hold the ladder,” she ordered.

Sighing, he nodded and handed her the scroll, which was very heavy. “You may as well go ahead and let it unroll and take just the top corner up and let the rest of the banner hang down, because once you get up there, you’re gonna need two hands to tie the banner.”

She nodded. “You’re right.” She grabbed the top corner and let the rest of the banner drop to the ground, then started up the ladder. When she got to the eye bolt up on the face of the brick building, she attached the cord by tying a square knot, then went down a few rungs and tied the lower cord to the corresponding circle bolt.

He nodded at her as she came down. “Good job. I mean, on the knots.”

She smiled sweetly. “I’m a good Girl Scout.”

He smiled, lowered the extension and carried the ladder to the other side of the building. The girl straightened out the banner and dragged it by the top right corner. He took it from her, started up the ladder. “My turn,” he quipped. “Hold the ladder,” he called down as he went up and quickly tied the banner.

He came back down and immediately lowered the extension and took the ladder down and laid it on its side on the ground.

She nodded at him. “Well, sir, thank you for your assistance.”

“It’s my pleasure.” He backed up and looked up at the banner and read it aloud. “Gabe Tanner Community Center, Grand Opening, Call 800-TANNER1 for Info.” He looked down at her. “So, this is Gabe Tanner’s flagship center.”

She nodded. “Yes, why? Do you know him?”

He shook his head. “No, I only know of him. From what I can tell, he’s the real deal. A great kid. Will he be at the grand opening?”

“Unfortunately, no.” She looked him over. “You look familiar. Are you from around here?”

He smiled and shook his head. “No. I’m from Rome.”

“Italy?”

He laughed. "Rome, Georgia." He held out his hand. "I'm Jericho Jones."

She smiled and shook his hand. "Rose. Rose Anderson."

He smiled. "It's very nice to meet you Rose Rose Anderson."

She rolled her eyes. "*And* he tells dad jokes," she muttered. Her eyes narrowed. "So, why do you look familiar? Are you famous or something?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I have a twin brother though, but you wouldn't know him unless you're big into footb..."

She clapped her hands together. "Joshua Jones, wide receiver for the Dolphins. High school All-American, full ride at Alabama."

His mouth fell open. "Wow. Now, that's a surprise."

"Why? Because girls don't understand football?"

"Well, no. I mean, most girls don't usually care enough about football to know like, a random player's history."

"Joshua Jones is not random." She grinned. "But to be honest, when I was in high school I had a boyfriend who was totally a fan of your brother. I was a sophomore, my boyfriend was a senior and your brother, and I guess you too, graduated the year before. We hated Alabama, of course, but we rooted for Joshua Jones. Did you play too?"

He sighed, nodded. "I did in high school. I was gonna have a full ride at UGA, but I got hurt. I ended up going in a different direction."

She nodded. "Well, sorry you got hurt."

He shrugged. "When God closes a door, He opens a window."

Her eyes blinked. Now he had her attention. "So, since you're not from around here, what are you doing in Pine Forest?"

"I'm here for a meeting with your mayor and your Fire Chief."

"Oh. Okay, that's interesting."

"And I'd better get going before I'm late and make a bad impression."

She nodded. "Well, Jericho Jones, if you're still hanging around you should stop by the Community Center and see what we have going on. Like, tomorrow night, we're gonna offer a Fall costume party and games for the kids with sooo many goodies that it will hopefully make them totally forget about witches and vampires and ghosts and devils and mass murderers."

He nodded. "That sounds like a good goal. If I'm still here, I may just stop by." He offered a small salute. "Well, it was nice to meet you Rose Rose Anderson. Be careful on that ladder."

She watched him walk away across the large front lawn. He looked to be almost as tall as her father, maybe about 6'3". Broad shoulders, well-muscled. She frowned. He was dressed quite casually for a meeting with the mayor. Jeans and a tan long-sleeved t-shirt that was tight around his biceps, or rather because of his biceps. A navy blue quilted vest and work boots completed the ensemble. He trotted across Main Street and got in a black pickup truck with a red stripe down the side. She nodded in approval. Bending over to lift the heavy ladder, she carried it inside the center and lugged it all the way to the giant utility closet.

Her mind was going over the giant list in her head of all the things that had

to be done before three tomorrow afternoon. The community center had now been officially opened for a week. Last weekend they had a fall festival and it was so much fun and highly attended.

They'd had all kinds of booths set up, different games for kids to play, arts and crafts to be sold, the county's best cooks presenting their baked goodies or grilling expertise. It brought in lots of revenue for the town. The day ended with a dance in the newly renovated gym with a band from Macon, Georgia who were growing in popularity and played only for the cost of their accommodations. *Boys of Creation* were getting the best of that deal though, because Isla August of Teenspotter.com had sent one of her new employees to cover the boys and their social media sites blew up. The group was part country, part rock, all Christian and all American.

The day had been a huge success on so many levels. The fact that it had Gabe's name on it was a big reason for that. Gabe Tanner Fallin' For Fun and Family was a hit and had pulled in lots of money for the Foundation. This next weekend, the first weekend in November, would be the grand opening, and they had a whole lot to do between now and then.

For now, Rose walked through the center, looking for things she may have missed that needed to be done. The large front reception area was decked out still with the fall theme. It used to be the office for teachers and administrators when it was an elementary school, but all of the offices had been taken out and it was a large open space with a high counter to the left. That counter was made of beautiful wood that looked like a giant butcher block, only darker and shinier. Currently, sitting behind that counter was Daisy, tapping away on a computer. She smiled up at her older sister.

"Almost time to head home?" Daisy said.

Rose nodded with a sigh. "I'm gonna walk the place and see if I've missed anything. What are you up to right now?"

"I'm updating the website, sending out the invite reminders for those who registered to join the Center, and making sure they know they can volunteer to help the Center or the Foundation in many different ways. Already several local churches have opted in to join forces just because they trust in Gabe's good name. You know, like, he's a true Christian, he's honest, he won't waste their time or their money, etcetera. It's pretty cool."

Rose nodded. "Daisy, do you feel overwhelmed, or like keeping up with this is too much for one person?"

Daisy smiled. "It's a full-time job, but for now, I can handle it, and thanks for asking."

"Well, talk to me if I put too much on you."

"You know I will. I'm just happy to be able to be employed right here in my home town and feel like I'm doing some good in the world."

Rose nodded. "I feel the same way. What about your degree?"

"I'm only a few credits away from graduating. My decision to take a light load won't hinder me at all."

Rose nodded. "So, has everyone else gone home?"

"No. Ms. Murphy is back looking over the classrooms where the kids will trick or treat. She says she wants to make sure everything is ready and also that nothing is against our rules. No blood and gore or devils or vampires or witches etc."

"What a find Peyton's mom is," Rose said with a glow. "I mean, she's been my rock in all of this. Her talents were sure going to waste over at *Pine Forest Elementary*. Now she's helping run the classes and activities for the entire community, and tutoring students, and literally, being my right-hand man. She is awesome."

"She's totally awesome," Daisy agreed. "She says this Center has been a huge boost for her, and for many others because she knew there were a lot of other people who were struggling in our community, just like she was, and she feels like she can now reach out to find solutions for them. The work we're doing here, Rose, it's amazing."

Rose nodded. "I love it, and it's all thanks to the faith of our little brother. He's so strong."

"And God is so good," Daisy added.

Rose smiled. "Yes, He is."

Daisy grinned. "Good talk."

Rose giggled.

✞✞✞

October 31st, Wee hours Thursday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Jordan clawed at the hands that squeezed her throat. She looked up into the dark eyes that glared at her. The eyes were black, completely black. The eyes looked into hers, nodding, almost smiling. They had her and they weren't gonna simply let her go.

She struggled. She cried. She kicked. She prayed. And she finally woke and sat straight up, sucking in breath. Sitting in bed, catching her breath, she looked around the dark room. There was a little bit of light coming in the window from the lights that were on the outer gates of the property. That wasn't enough and she leaned over and turned on the lamp. Breathing a sigh of relief, she sat still, going over in her mind the dream, or rather, the nightmare she'd just had.

She'd been back on those rocks near the dumpster. The guy was looking into her eyes as he strangled her. He was enjoying her fear and her pain. He seemed to be more than one person. It seemed that there were a bunch of people all laughing at her, willing her to die. Breathing hard, Jordan kicked the covers off.

"I'm losing my mind," she muttered. She felt like she was suffocating. Like she was trapped. Like she needed to get up, get out, like there wasn't enough space, enough room. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she reached for the crutches and made her way to the bathroom. When she came back, she took a pain pill and got settled back in bed. But after she laid there for about ten minutes she felt like she was gonna explode, the anxiety was so bad.

Grabbing the crutches again, she headed out into the hall and stared at Three's bedroom door.

She sighed. He'd be asleep. He'd worked hard and fought hard yesterday. He needed rest. She walked up and down the long hallway a few times, but that wasn't enough. She felt so closed in. So trapped. Turning, she headed down the stairs. Her breath was coming fast, as if she'd run a long way and all she could think about was she had to get outside. She needed air. She needed open spaces. But she couldn't go out the back door to the beach, she'd learned that. Instead, she headed to the front door.

Suddenly, all she could think about was getting out that door. Hoping and praying some alarm wouldn't sound, she unlocked the door and pulled it open. No alarm. Thank goodness. Stepping out onto the large entryway, she drew a deep breath. The air was cool, which was comforting. She tried to see down to the front gate, but the front lawn was too hilly. Looking out across that lawn, all she wanted to do was get out there, in the middle, open space. Breathe. She started down the steps, being careful with the crutches, and headed out across the lawn, slowly, carefully, pulling in huge, deep breaths, trying to dispel the feeling of being closed in, trapped, suffocating.

✞✞✞

Ricky Kino picked up his phone when it buzzed. "Yes?"

"Sorry to wake you, sir, but Miss Jordan has left the premises."

Ricky sat up. "The beach?"

"No, sir. She left out the front door and is walking in a southeast direction across the lawn."

"Thanks," Ricky said with a sigh. "I'll have Eric see to her. You have eyes on her?"

"Not physically. Just watching her on the monitor."

"Got it. Thanks."

"Yes, sir."

Ricky called his son.

"Everything okay, Dad?" young Eric said quickly.

"Jordan has made a run for it," Ricky said.

"Again. Good grief. Sorry, Dad," young Eric said as he got out of bed and pulled on some jeans.

"No need to apologize. She must be having a hard time to do it again. Could even be sleep walking. She went out the front door and is heading across the lawn, southeast direction. Agent Mitchell is watching her on his monitor."

"Got it. On my way."

In seconds young Eric was out the front door. He couldn't see her, but headed southeast. Only a minute later he saw her, just as she took a tumble down a small hill. She was sitting up, rubbing her elbow as he approached.

"You okay?" he asked. "Are you hurt?"

She drew in a sharp breath. "Three?"

"Jordan, are you okay?" he asked, checking her head and looking her over. "What are you doing?"

She sniffed and he realized she was crying.

"I, uh, I don't know. I had to get out. Had to get away."

"Get away? From what? From who?"

"I don't know. I felt like I was suffocating. Like I was gonna die. I felt like I needed to get out, get away, out into the open spaces, out and away."

He knelt down in front of her. "Baby, what's wrong? What's goin' on?"

"I don't know," she cried. "I think I'm losing my mind. I felt like there were people in the room. I was all closed in. I couldn't get away. He was squeezing my throat so hard. And he was enjoying it. He was smiling."

Eric looked carefully into her face. "Jordan? Are you awake?"

She looked up at him. "Yes, I'm awake. I had a nightmare though. All of them wanted me to suffer, wanted me to be afraid, wanted me to die."

"All of them?"

She nodded as tears coursed down her cheeks. "There were so many. They wanted to kill me. They're mad that I survived. I have to get away. Out in the open. What is wrong with me?"

"Okay. Okay," he said softly. "Baby, aren't you cold?"

She shook her head. "Please don't make me go back inside. I'm gonna die. I know it."

"What if we go back inside and you come sleep with me in my room?"

"Please, Three, please let me stay out here."

He blew out a breath and nodded. "Okay, hold on. I'll be right back."

Young Eric ran back into the house and into his closet, unhooked his sleeping bag from his bug-out pack, then pulled the comforter off his bed, and two pillows and ran back outside. He got to Jordan who was now lying on her back in the grass, her arms spread wide.

He unzipped the sleeping bag until it was flat and spread it out on the lawn, threw one of the pillows on near the top edge, lifted Jordan and placed her on the sleeping bag. He then placed the other pillow under Jordan's cast, pulled his phone from his pocket, sat down next to Jordan and pulled the comforter over both of them. Next, he texted his father.

~Don't worry. Jordan and I are having a little front yard campout. I'll explain later. I'll let Agent Mitchell know.

He sent that text and then another one to the agent at the gate, laid the phone by his pillow and turned toward Jordan.

"Is this okay?"

She sniffed and nodded. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble. It felt like I was gonna die in there. I didn't mean to wake you. I thought maybe it was only the back doors that notified security, the ones to the beach, where there is no gate."

He chuckled. "So, no offense, but you weren't thinking very clearly."

Instead of laughing she started to cry again.

"Oh, come on now, Twenty-three. I was just teasing you. I just said that to make you laugh. It was supposed to make you laugh," he said again as he scooted in close to her, turning onto his right side.

She sniffed. "I'm sorry. I guess I don't feel like laughing."

"Then what *do* you feel like? I mean, tell me what in the world is going on in that gorgeous head of yours."

She wiped at her tears. "I don't know if I can even explain."

"Try."

"You always say that."

He smiled. "It's good for you to try to explain what you're thinking and feeling. At least, that's what Granddad tells me."

She sighed. "Okay, well, it feels like, chaos. Commotion. Like a bunch of people talking and whispering at the same time. It feels sad. It feels scary. I can see that guy's eyes glaring at me, looking into my eyes as he strangled me. He wanted me dead. He wanted to kill me, I know it, I can feel it, and he still wants me dead."

Young Eric blew out a breath. This was much more complicated than he realized. He stroked her face. "What did you and Granddad talk about yesterday?"

Shaking her head, she thought hard. "Um, we talked about God and why He would allow something like this to happen to me, and that even though it was happening, God was right there with me. He told me to not be afraid, because God wasn't going to let anyone kill me. He told me that I'm one of God's warriors and that I have to get strong, physically, mentally, and spiritually. He wants to train me."

Young Eric rose up and looked down at her. "Really?"

She nodded. "He said God is nudging him to train me to be strong. He said I was important, which I don't understand."

"I do. So are you gonna train with Granddad?"

"It scares me, and I don't know if I have enough time. But I also know I'd be crazy to turn down being trained by *the* Grandmaster Kino."

"Don't let it scare you. He wouldn't be so mean and strict on you like he is on me. He expects a lot from me because I've been training my whole life. He'd go easy on you, well, at least he will at first."

She nodded. "I'll probably do it. Ya know, when I'm with you, just lying here, talking to you, I'm okay. I feel normal. But when you're not around, I feel so vulnerable, so scared. I hate that I've become so emotionally dependent on you that I can barely function."

"Baby, it's only because of this attack. You were functioning fine until that. You'd attended classes, you cleaned your apartment. You were all alone, without Agent Trout, and you were fine. It's just because you were attacked and really, beaten up pretty severely. What you feel is normal."

"And you should know, right?"

He sighed. "Right. Except I wasn't hurt as badly as you." He ran his hand over her hair, turned her head and kissed her softly.

She gave a soft moan. "Right now, everything seems fine. Like I can handle anything. But earlier, when I had to get out of the house, it felt like I was suffocating. Like I was being strangled all over again. I thought, if this doesn't stop, if I keep feeling like this, then I don't want to live anymore. And..."

"What?" He rose up and looked down at her. "You actually thought that?"

She blinked up at him. "I'm just telling you what was in my head."

"Those are very dangerous thoughts, Jordan. You thought you'd rather be dead? You thought you'd rather leave me? This is not good."

"I wouldn't do anything to leave you, Eric. I wouldn't like, kill myself."

"Well, many people who attempt suicide and fail, say that a few months before they tried, the thought never crossed their minds."

"Three, I would never leave you, not on purpose."

"Jordan, I need to ask you something and I need the truth. Are you thinking about hurting yourself right now?"

"No, of course not."

"Have you thought about how you would do it?"

"No, Three. I said no. Really."

"You would tell me if you were really feeling that way?'

"Yes."

"If that changes, you tell me right away. Do you hear me?"

She giggled. "Calm down, Three. I hear you loud and clear."

He blew out a breath, thinking he would still talk to his grandfather about this. "Okay. Sorry. But I love you, Jordan, and I have plans for you and me, and I need you by my side. So, for now, let's do what I had planned when I brought out the blankets and pillows."

"That sounds intriguing."

He chuckled. "Good. So, lie on your back."

She straightened her body. He did too.

"Now let's look up at the sky. What do you see?"

"I see a few stars."

"Hmm," he said as he sat back up. He picked up his phone and sent a text. A minute later, the lights along the iron fence went out. He laid back down.

"Now what do you see?"

"A lot more stars. They're so beautiful."

"Have you ever been camping?"

"No."

"We'll have to go one day. When we get away from the city lights, out in the wilderness, you'd be amazed how the stars just fill up the entire sky. I can't wait to show you that. But for now, just look up at the sky, and take a deep breath. Breathe in. Good. Now out. In, now out. Now, I want you to breathe in to the count of four, and then out to the count of seven. Ready?"

"Um hmm."

"Breathe in, one, two, three, four, and now out, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven."

He had her do it several times.

"Do you feel a little more centered?"

"Yes," she said softly. "I actually feel sleepy."

"Good."

He sat up, took the pillow out from under her cast, turned on his side and

placed the pillow on his thigh. “Turn toward me, Jordan, and put your knee on my hip and your foot on the pillow.”

She smiled as she looked into his eyes.

He also smiled. “There, much better.”

She sighed. “So much better.”

“Close your eyes,” he commanded softly.

When she did, he leaned forward and softly kissed each eyelid. Then he went over her face with his lips, kissing each spot, each cheek, her forehead, her nose, her chin, her lips. She moaned softly.

He let his lips skim her jaw, then he moved down to her neck, and her shoulders. Then he lifted her left hand and kissed each fingertip.

She sighed with pleasure. Her eyes fluttered closed as she totally relaxed. “Did that feel good?” he whispered.

“Hmm, so good.”

He put his arm around her and pulled her tight up against him. “One day, Jordan, I’m gonna kiss every single inch of you.”

She breathed a deep sigh and allowed herself the bliss of falling asleep in his arms.

✞✞✞

1 Peter 1:6-7

“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Chapter Twelve

October 31st, 3:30 PM, Thursday Afternoon
New York School of Ballet and Dance- Los Angeles Campus

Taylor stood at the barre as instructed. A young girl about the same age as Taylor spoke as she grabbed Taylor's hips and brought them into alignment.

"Your flexibility is surprisingly pretty good, for someone just learning to dance," the girl said. "But you can't let your hip ride up like that." She pushed it down. "See the difference?"

Taylor nodded. "Yes, I see. Thanks. But my flexibility shouldn't be a surprise."

"Why not?"

"Well, because I'm, well, I'm a Kino, and we're martial artists and flexibility is key in martial arts."

The girl stood back and looked her over. "Good grief, you're Taylor Kino. I'm sorry. When Madam Janine asked me to come in here and help you get stretched out, she didn't tell me who you were. She just said you're a new student that she's gonna be giving private lessons to."

"So, you're a student here, or a teacher?" Taylor asked.

"I'm a senior student."

"What's your name?"

"I'm Ginny," she said with a slight smile.

"Nice to meet you, Ginny. How long have you been studying?"

"Since I was five. So that would be thirteen years. What about you?"

Taylor frowned. "I've never been taught dance."

"But didn't I see you dance on *America Can Dance*?"

"Yeah, but that's just because my boyfriend went viral on social media when we did a dance for his prom and for a friend's wedding. They wanted to take advantage of people wanting to tune in to see us dance."

"But you were great. You didn't look untrained. You looked like a pro."

"Well, now I know you're just being kind."

"I am never kind."

Taylor giggled. "I'll keep that in mind. Anyway, I love to dance, but I didn't know how much I loved it until recently. Then Miss Caroline said it was never too late and told me to come here."

"Miss Caroline? Are you talking about Madam Smith? The owner of the school?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. The Nashes are friends of our family. Miss Caroline is pretty much one of the sweetest people I've ever known. And she took the dance

Gabe and I did at the wedding and made it awesome."

"Yeah, it was really good. And, like, let's talk about that Gabe, I mean, the guy is totally hot. You are so lucky."

Taylor nodded. "Funny, I've known him my whole life but never really noticed him, I mean, how cute he is, until this year. And you're right. I'm really lucky to have him."

"So, are you guys like, totally in love?"

Taylor grinned. "Totally."

Ginny sighed. "Well, I guess I'd better get you all stretched out and warmed up before Madam Janine gets in here."

Taylor nodded. "Okay, but I do have to clarify one thing. My flexibility is not just pretty good. It's great."

"Oh really," Ginny said. "Well, let's just see about that. See if you can try to do everything I do."

Taylor nodded. "You're on."

Ginny went to the floor and went down in a front split. Taylor followed effortlessly. Ginny changed legs. Taylor did too. Ginny went into a side split. Taylor did too. Ginny lifted her arms above her head and bent forward, touching her nose to the floor. Taylor did too, but also touched her navel to the floor, her back perfectly straight. Ginny tried hard to stump her, but flexibility-wise, Taylor was at the top of the game. Still, Ginny did have to correct her form and Taylor humbly accepted that help.

They both looked up when Madam Janine finally entered the room. They immediately got to their feet.

Taylor smiled at the woman and bowed, which made Janine's eyebrows shoot up. "You don't have to bow to me."

"Oh!" Taylor said, obviously embarrassed. "I'm so sorry. It's just habit."

Ginny looked at Taylor with an air of authority. "We don't bow. But we do curtsy."

"So," Janine began. "I see you and Miss Taylor have become acquainted. And since Ginny is almost smiling, I'm guessing the two of you will eventually be close friends."

When Taylor looked confused, Janine went on to explain. "I sent Ginny in here to stretch you out to see how either of you would handle each other. With you being a latecomer and a celebrity, I thought Ginny might look down on you, and with you being a celebrity, you might look down on her. It was a bit of a test."

"Um, excuse me, Madam Janine, but I have to stop you and correct you. I am not a celebrity. My mom and dad, yes. Me, no."

"Noted," Janine said and then went on. "And since Ginny, who hates everybody, is smiling, I'm going to assume that she, at the very least, can tolerate you, or already has some respect for you, or, at the very most, actually likes you."

Taylor giggled. "You hate everybody?"

Ginny shrugged. "Usually. But you are very disarming. You have an

honesty about you that I like. And you don't think you're 'all that.' And you have confidence, even though you've never taken dance. And even though you've been on *America Can Dance*, you were humble about it. And, to be honest, it doesn't hurt that Madam Smith is friends with your family, because I wouldn't want to disappoint Madam Smith."

"Well," Taylor said. "I hope that eventually you will only like me because I'm me and not because of who I know."

"We'll just have to see about that," Ginny said coyly.

"Okay, Taylor. Let's get started. We will begin with the absolute basics and work our way up from there. However, I have to be able to see your body so that I can see the alignment, so you must remove the sweats and shirt."

Taylor eyed the woman. She was young, maybe in her late twenties. She had blonde hair, up in a bun, and wore a blue leotard with white tights and pink ballet shoes. Taylor herself had on a black leotard and black tights, covered with a thick pair of sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt. She quickly removed her outer clothing revealing a tight, well-muscled body.

"Well Miss Taylor, you may be a dance beginner, but obviously your body is not unfamiliar with physicality. I'm assuming you work out or maybe do what your father does?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm a martial artist."

She nodded. "Come to the barre. Ginny, you stay and help me to demonstrate."

"Yes, ma'am," Ginny said.

Taylor followed her new dance teacher to the barre.

"There are five basic positions," Janine began.

✝✝✝

October 31st, 6:30 PM, Thursday Evening

Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose smiled at Laynah as her friend arrived back at the center. She'd given kids horse rides all afternoon, and then loaded Sugar and Rocky and taken them back to the ranch. She promised she'd be back to help with the rest of the festivities and she was true to her word.

"Hey girl, glad you made it back."

"Why? Something go wrong?"

"Nope, just always good to see ya. So, have you heard from Jake lately?"

She shook her head. "Not really. I mean, he called a few nights ago, but he had to end the call suddenly and I haven't heard from him since then."

Rose sighed. "I'm sure he's okay."

"I am too," Laynah said.

"You're a stronger person than I am, Bugs. I don't know how you do it."

"Well, I'm not that strong, but I have a lot to keep me occupied."

"So, how's your mom doing?"

"She's hanging in there. How's your mom?"

"Ya know, she had a whole lot of morning sickness in the beginning and I thought this is gonna be a nightmare, but now that's gone and she seems fine.

She's getting huge, but she hasn't had many problems at all. Maybe it's because she's used to carrying twins."

"Maybe." Laynah looked around at the packed center. Most of the people she didn't even recognize, which meant they were reaching a lot of people from outside of town. "So, what can I help with?"

"Well, you can check to see if Mrs. Murphy needs any more candy for the trick or treaters, or you can go in the gym and check on all the game booths. Lily and Daisy might need some help there. Or you can check on Violet to see if she needs anything for the little show she and the kids have prepared. You can help with any of the other games. There's a mean version of adult musical chairs goin' on."

Laynah laughed. "Sounds like fun. How about I go do all of those things. I'll start with Mrs. Murphy and work my way around."

"Thanks, Bugs. Oh!"

"Oh, what?"

"Oh, don't turn around, but there's the guy I told you about. Jericho Jones. I invited him, but I didn't think he'd show." She looked him over quickly. He wore olive drab pants with his work boots. His shirt was also olive drab. It was button-down, short-sleeved and had some kind of bright red insignia on the breast, a US flag patch on the right shoulder, another patch on the left shoulder, which she couldn't make out, and several smaller patches on both breast pockets.

"Well, can I turn and look at him or not? Cuz I really want to see if he looks as good as you said."

"Wait until he approaches and speaks, and then you can look at him."

Laynah giggled.

†††

Jericho Jones saw her as he approached the doors of the center. The beautiful blonde was standing in the center of the lobby speaking with a beautiful red-head. Must be something in the water, because he'd seen several gorgeous females since he'd been here in Pine Forest. He'd had several meetings and he was tired and hungry, but wasn't gonna forget the invitation to stop by the *Gabe Tanner Center* to see what they have going on. Of course, he'd be looking at it from a different point of view, but still, he did want to catch another glimpse of Rose Anderson.

He glanced at the small decal on the glass door. It was an American flag with the words "2nd Amendment Protected," printed in gold letters beneath. He nodded, opened one of the two sets of double doors and stepped in. Immediately a smile came to his lips as he heard the sound of music and children cheering and people laughing. The smells were of familiar foods, dogs and burgers and sweets. Maybe he'd get a meal out of it. Rose looked up at him as he entered. She smiled at him and it made him feel like he lifted up off the floor. Wow. When was the last time that happened? He couldn't even remember. He approached her.

"Well, hello again, Jericho Jones," Rose said with a warm smile.

"Nice to see you, RoseRose," he answered.

She frowned and rolled her eyes, making him laugh.

"Jericho, this is Melaynah Appel," Rose said.

Laynah shook his hand. "Hello."

His brow wrinkled. "Appel? As in the owner of Appel Martial Arts?"

She smiled. "I'm married to Master Appel's son."

He nodded. "The Marine, right?"

"Yes. Do you know them?"

"John Appel was at one of my meetings today."

"So, what kind of meetings are you having?" Rose asked. "Not meaning to be intrusive, but, also meaning exactly that. I mean, it looks like you're wearing a military uniform."

He laughed. "Well, it's not military. I'm gonna be developing a new program for the paramedics and firefighters."

"Really? That's interesting. So, who do you work for exactly?"

"I work for myself. I'm a consultant for emergency services. Firemen mostly. I teach special operations for firefighters."

"Oh! Like smokejumpers or wildland firefighters?" Laynah asked.

He nodded. "Like that but different. Ours includes handling that and more. Like special rescues in tight spaces, or underwater, and hostile-event rescues, where firefighters and paramedics have to work alongside law enforcement in an active-threat environment. Basically, we take some of the mindset and specialized skills you'd associate with military special operations and apply them to advanced fire and rescue work."

"Well now," Rose began. "That is impressive."

He smiled. "They are needed skills these days. And since I have the skills, I decided to start my own company. And I'm here in Pine Forest because Pine County is the fastest growing county in the state of Georgia and Pine Forest is the fastest growing town and your mayor and town council are looking into making the area as safe as possible."

"So, in other words, you're here to retrain our fire department?"

"To oversee the training, yes."

"And where does my father-in-law come in?" Laynah asked.

"John Appel is a huge asset to this town and is gonna help in the training. Not the actual training, but in the logistics."

"Wow," Rose said. "That's pretty exciting."

He nodded. "I'm looking forward to getting started, but first, I have to find living arrangements for the guys and myself."

"That's gonna be a tough one," Rose said. "Apparently there are a lot of people trying to buy up real estate in Pine Forest, thanks to Gabe Tanner, but I'll keep an eye and ear out for something."

"I understand there's a new motel goin' up."

"That would be my family handling that," Laynah said. "But it won't be ready until next year."

His brow wrinkled. "I thought I heard someone say it was being built by a

woman named Lisa Stewart."

Laynah smiled. "Actually by Lisa Stewart, and John and Jodi Appel, and they are all my family."

Rose grinned. "Lisa Stewart is Laynah's mom."

"Well, you are quite the influential person in this town, aren't you?" Jericho said.

Laynah giggled. "Yeah, right. I'm just a down-home girl."

"Do you know Gabe Tanner?"

"I'm his biggest fan."

Rose snorted. "Jericho, would you like me to show you around? And have you eaten?"

"Um, yes and no."

"Great! Then we'll grab a plate first. Hold on just a second."

She pulled out her phone and called Daisy. "Hey, sis, can I get you to come man the front desk until I get back?..... I'm gonna show our new special operations firefighter around the building. Thanks, sweetie."

A minute later Daisy came hurrying up the corridor, her eyes opening wide at the sight of the large man. She smiled.

"Daisy, this is Jericho Jones. Jericho, one of my little sisters, Daisy."

He held out his hand. "Wow, you two look a lot alike."

Rose grinned. "Yes we do. Daisy, thanks for helping out. I promise I won't be too long."

"Take your time," Daisy purred, making Rose roll her eyes.

✝✝✝

Rose eyed the plates of food in front of Jericho. Two hotdogs, loaded, one hamburger, a mound of fries covered with ketchup, three cupcakes and a Snickers bar. They sat at one of the large tables set up on one side of the gym. She watched him as he briefly closed his eyes before he ate. She was pretty sure he'd blessed his food, and that made her smile. Not that she was that interested in him. He was definitely a good-looking man, but he was here to do a job and then he'd leave, and she wasn't interested in another long distance relationship with anybody, even if he was cute and prayed before he ate. Though it was a big upgrade from Mike Moreland's attitude toward God.

He took a huge bite of one of the hotdogs and smiled at her, nodding his head as he chewed and swallowed. "That hits the spot. Thanks for dinner RoseRose."

She grinned. "You're welcome, though really it's compliments of Gabe Tanner. So, are you really gonna eat all that?"

"I was. I haven't eaten since breakfast. Why? Do you want something?"

"Hmm," Rose said as she looked over his two plates. "I'll take a fry," she said as she lifted one from his plate. "I mean, it's hard to watch someone eat a plate of greasy french fries covered in ketchup and not steal at least one fry."

He nodded with a grin. "Right?"

"Hey, mister."

Rose and Jericho turned to smile at a boy about six or seven years old who

tapped on Jericho's arm.

"Hello, there," Jericho said.

The boy smiled. "Are you a soldier?"

"No, I'm a firefighter."

The boy's eyes opened wide. "Oh. Did you bring your fire truck?"

"Sorry, I don't have a fire truck."

"Why not?"

"Well, because the fire trucks belong to the town, not to the fireman."

"Devin's dad brought his fire truck to school once."

"Well, it wasn't his fire truck. He had to get special permission to bring it to school so that he could show all the students all about the fire truck."

"Oh. So, do you know Devin's dad?"

"No, but I bet I'm gonna be meeting him soon."

"Cool. Well, bye."

Rose laughed as the boy turned and ran back to his friends. "I guess the conversation was over."

Jericho smiled. "Guess so."

"So tell me," Rose began. "What other fire departments have you taught?"

He smiled. "My credentials are extensive."

She shrugged. "Name one."

"We just finished working with the Savannah FD. Before that we were in Birmingham, Alabama, before that Knoxville, Tennessee, before that, Fulton County here in Georgia, and the list goes on."

"How long do you stay in each place?"

"About three months."

She nodded. "All those places you named, they're fairly large places compared to Pine County. How can we afford you?"

He grinned. "You can't. But I reached out to the Mayor of Pine Forest and offered a discounted rate."

"Why?"

"I felt led to do so."

"Led by whom?"

"By God."

Rose smiled. "I like that."

"That's good to hear."

"Why?"

"Always good to fellowship with the saints."

She smiled and picked up one of his cupcakes.

He eyed it but didn't say anything.

She smiled at him. "I'll get you another one."

"That's okay. I'll share, I mean, since you fed me for free."

"Awww, how sweet," she said with a giggle as she peeled the paper away from the cake and took a bite.

Jericho watched the beautiful blonde as she licked frosting off her upper lip. This girl was about as sexy as a girl could be and he wondered if she was

doing it on purpose, or just not aware of how appealing she was. Her eyes were the brightest blue he'd ever seen, her lashes were dark. Her lips were pink, though she wore no lipstick. Her skin was smooth, flawless really. A little turned-up nose made her look childlike. Her smile was bright, and full of mischief. Her blond hair looked to be natural, not bleached. And he figured he was right about that since her sister, Daisy, also had bright blond hair, though Daisy's was long. Rose's hair came just barely past her shoulders. She had on a simple orange t-shirt that had *Gabe Tanner Community Center* on the front, so why did she look so darn sexy?

Rose pulled out her phone and checked the time. "Well, let's take a quick tour before Violet and her gang give us a performance I'm sure that you won't want to miss."

"Violet? Another sister?"

She nodded. "Yep."

"Rose, Daisy, Violet. I'm seeing a pattern here."

"Very good. Big, handsome AND smart."

His eyes opened in surprise. "Oh! You think I'm handsome?"

Rose gave a short laugh. "Ha, don't go gettin' all full of yourself. You're not the only one I think that about."

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am. Believe me, I don't take myself too seriously."

They rose, cleared their places and headed down toward the classrooms. Kids in costumes were running from door to door. Each door was decorated with things that represented fall. Corn fields, pumpkins, leaves, scarecrows, sunflowers. There were also some superhero doors, angels, barnyard animals, turkeys made from handprints, deer, and squirrels gathering nuts.

The kids were screaming and running and having a blast and everyone had a huge bag or plastic pumpkin filled to the brim. The volunteers opening the doors were making the kids answer questions before they got their candy.

"I notice that you accomplished your goal of no witches or goblins or vampires."

Rose nodded. "This center has to represent certain beliefs. Gabe is a devout Christian. He wouldn't want to be represented by blood and gore and demons and devils and occult-type things. This center tonight is not really a celebration of Halloween, but an alternative to Halloween. Our family has always been allowed to trick or treat, but we were always good things, like angels, or kittens, or silly things like robots, or a teapot, nothing really that is associated with evil. But we don't look down on those who celebrate Halloween, mostly because they do it innocently. We just try to set a good example of how things can be handled in an uplifting or more wholesome kind of way, and don't invite the demons into our lives." She turned and led him back toward the gym.

He nodded. "Well now, that's impressive. And do *you* run the center, or do you just work here?"

"I manage the center. We just opened it officially last week."

"So, would you be insulted if I asked your age, because you look like you're in high school."

She smiled. "I'll take that as a compliment. I'm twenty-three. I'm about to be twenty-four in a few months. I just graduated college with a degree in business management. Would you be insulted if I asked you your age?"

"Not at all. I'm twenty-eight."

She nodded. "And how long have you been a firefighter?"

"Since I graduated from high school. Or, since I was eighteen."

She stopped walking and poked a finger at his chest. "And what are all these badges about?"

"They're things I'm qualified and certified to teach. Not all of the things, but they represent some of them. And some are certification patches, some are company qualification patches."

"Okay, tell me that one," she said as she put a fingertip on a blue badge with a giant wave on it.

"That one is for special water operations, meaning flood, swift water, and white water."

"Cool. And how about that one that also looks like water with a red crab looking thing in it."

He looked down with a smile. "That's a scuba diver, not a crab and that is a master scuba diving badge."

"Oooh, a master! How about this one?"

He looked down and lifted her finger so he could see which badge she pointed to. "That's marine search and rescue." He pointed to the one beside it. "And this one is land search and rescue. And this one is tower rescue, that's extrication, that's Master EMT Paramedic, that's confined space, that's trench rescue, that's high angle rescue, that's airports, subway, hazardous material, and that's Hotshot Firefighter." He pointed to the badge on his left shoulder. "And that one is Master of Special Operations Firefighter."

"So, wow, that's pretty impressive."

He sighed. "Well, I've been at it for ten years."

"Ten years and you're already teaching other people? I mean, doesn't it take a long time just to make like, a fire chief?"

"Yes, it could take ten or more years to become a fire chief. And I have what it takes to be a fire chief, but I had no interest in the politics and compromises that sometimes come with an administrative position. I knew I had great leadership qualities. I knew I could learn, become certified and in many cases become a master in nearly every discipline I wanted to master. I put in my time in the trenches and finally struck out on my own. I set a good example. I practice what I preach and I chose a few really good guys to work with in my company and we've come a long way very fast."

"Again, impressive. And here we are back in the gym." She pointed toward the piano. "And that's Violet."

He looked at the girl at the piano and back at Rose, back at Violet and back at Rose again. "She's your twin?"

Rose smiled. "Yes. She's the yin and I am definitely the yang."

He laughed. "Okay, use a different analogy, because I'm not sure if yin is

the good one, or if yang is."

She smiled. "Hmm, let's see. Violet is the sweet, and I'm the sour."

He nodded. "Got it." He looked over at Violet again. She was the exact replica of Rose, except her hair was very long. She was playing the piano beautifully as kids and parents and community helpers were all ushering into the gym and sitting on the floor in a huge semicircle.

Rose grabbed his arm and ushered him forward. Violet looked up as he approached. She smiled, stopped playing and stood.

"Violet, this is Jericho Jones," Rose said.

Violet offered her hand. "Hello," she said sweetly. "Nice to meet you."

He nodded. "You as well. Usually people say, 'so and so has told me so much about you,' but I must admit, Rose told me nothing about you."

Violet laughed. "Yeah, well, she's like that sometimes. She keeps her cards close to the vest."

He nodded. "I see. And so, Violet, do you help Rose manage this place?"

"No, but I help out when I can, especially when it comes to musical type things, like tonight, where the children will sing a few songs about fall and thanksgiving and family."

"I can't wait."

Rose smiled. "You're welcome to take one of the seats in the back, or over there on the bleachers. It's time for me to go to work."

He nodded and headed to the back, but instead of sitting, he stood against a wall.

Rose walked to the front of the large group of children all sitting on the floor. "Hello, everyone," she said brightly. "And welcome to the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*. I'm Rose Anderson, as I'm sure almost all of you know, and I am excited and honored to be the manager of this facility. We are in need of volunteers and some employees, so please go to our website and check it out. *Gabe Tanner Community Centers dot com.* You can also access our website from the Pine Forest town website and from Gabe Tanner dot com. Just a note for the parents here real quick. You may have seen our big banner out front for the grand opening. That grand opening is a month long affair and will include all kinds of activities for the kids and families, including a feeding of the homeless on Thanksgiving Day. So make sure you check it out on the website, see if you can help with any of the things we might need, and join us if you can. Gabe is coming home to join us and I know a lot of people who are looking forward to that!"

She paused and looked around, and nodded at Daisy. "Are we live?"

Daisy nodded with a smile. "We've been live for awhile."

Rose continued. "Okay, good, so we have a treat, not a trick for you all tonight. I happen to know that the children in our little county from Pine Forest Elementary, Brookwood Elementary, Creekside Elementary and Cross Roads Elementary have a great talent for singing and tonight, in gratitude for the parents all allowing the children to come here and spend their evening with us, they're gonna sing three songs for you. Our own Violet Anderson has worked

with them extensively over the past few weeks, and I am blown away by what she's done with them. I'm gonna help out a bit, so Violet can play the piano. Okay, children, those who are singing for us tonight, please quietly rise and come to the risers up front."

There was immediate chaos.

"Hey!" Rose said loudly. "What part of quietly don't you understand?"

Everyone laughed.

As the children found their way to their places, the place grew quiet again.

Jericho watched as Rose commanded the attention of about forty elementary school children from little five-year-olds to ten-year-olds. They all got still and quiet as Rose stood in front of them, and Jericho realized Rose was gonna direct them in the songs. She had some index cards in her hand and she glanced at Violet, who nodded at her, and then looked at the children and nodded at the group with a smile.

One of the older boys stepped forward to one of the three microphones that were placed in front of the risers.

He cleared his throat. "Our first song is because we're thankful for our town and our country because we are free to assemble together like we are today, I mean, tonight." The boy's face reddened as he went back to his place on the risers.

Violet played an intro, Rose conducted, and the children sang 'America the Beautiful.' They sang it surprisingly well. Even the little ones seemed to know the words. At the end, some of the children broke out in harmony and when they finished they received a great deal of applause.

When the audience quieted, Rose nodded and a girl stepped down from the risers and to the microphone and stood on her tiptoes. "Our next song is because we are thankful for our families. Some of us have large families. Some of us have small families. But here at the Gabe Tanner Center, we are all one big family." She smiled and went back to her place on the riser.

The piano began to play and the children began to sway as three children stepped down, two boys and a girl, one at each mic.

The first boy began to sing. "Some...times in our lives...we all have pain...we all have sorrow..."

The girl sang the next line. "But... if we are wise..."

The entire group came in on the chorus loud and strong, taking everyone's breath away.

The third boy came in after the chorus with an amazing soulful voice. "Please... swallow your pride..."

Then the group, including the three soloists started clapping their hands and sang in crescendo. "You just call on me brother when you need a hand...We all need somebody to lean on..."

Jericho was blown away. How in the world did these two sisters get these kids to sing like this in only a few weeks? It was phenomenal. He was mesmerized as he watched the rest of the song and gave a few quick whistles during the ovation they received.

The place quieted, waiting to see what the third number would be. When Rose had said the children were gonna sing a few songs for their parents, he thought it would be children's songs. Something about a pumpkin, or sunshine, or something like that. He couldn't wait to see what they would do as a finale.

Three little ones stepped forward and an older girl took one of the mics out of the stand and held it out to the first little one, a girl. "Our last song is to say thank you to God."

She then moved the mic to a little boy. "We are grateful for this world."

She moved it to the last little one, another girl. "And God has the whole world in His hands."

The children went back to their places and they swung into a resounding rendition of 'The Whole World in His Hands,' including all of the hand motions that accompany the song.

At the end the children received a giant standing ovation.

Violet stood, and Rose thanked her and commended the children on a job well done. She looked straight at the camera that Daisy was using to live stream. "And thank you also to all of our online viewers who couldn't be with us in person. Sending our love out to everyone. And for now, good night from the *Gabe Tanner Community Center*. If you'd like to set up your own Gabe Tanner Center in your community, contact us at GabeTanner.com. It's a wrap. Children, you are dismissed to go find your parents."

The place was a madhouse as parents found their children and began gathering their buckets and bags of candy and their jackets, or stood around chatting and getting pictures and commending all the children on their performance.

Jericho stood aside watching Rose be congratulated on a wonderful evening, as well as Violet for the musical feat she pulled off. He was impressed. With everything. He'd felt he needed to come to Pine Forest and he was discovering that it was indeed, a special place. He too wanted to congratulate the sisters on a job well done so he waited until most everyone had left. Rose, Violet and Daisy were standing together when another young lady walked up and hugged them. Surprisingly, she looked exactly like Daisy. Another set of twins? He moved forward.

Rose smiled at him as he approached. "So, weren't the children amazing?"

He nodded. "I was blown away. Really. I did not expect to be so thoroughly entertained. What you did, it was amazing."

"Oh, I didn't do it. It was all Violet. She's been working with the kids for weeks. She had to play the piano though and she felt like the kids needed someone to look at to direct them. Violet promised me all I had to do was stand in front, smile pretty and wave my arms around, and that is all I did."

"She did a little more than that," Violet put in.

"Yeah," Daisy added. "Don't let Rose's humility fool you. She knows she's all that. But she's right, this was all Violet."

Lily giggled.

"So, Lily," Rose began. "Let me introduce you to Jericho Jones. He's in

town to fix our first responders."

Lily smiled and offered her hand. "Nice to meet you, Jericho," Lily said. "Cool name."

He smiled. "Thanks. I get that a lot. So, are you another twin?"

"Yes. We have two sets of twins in our family so far."

"So far?"

Lily nodded. "Our mom is pregnant with twins right now."

"Rose!"

They all turned at the sound of a child screaming Rose's name.

Jericho watched as a little girl with long, silky, dark hair and big blue eyes came running across the gym, her arms open wide. Rose scooped her up.

"There's my little flower," Rose said with glee. "How's my Iris doing?"

"I got candy."

Rose laughed. "I bet you did."

"Daddy says I can't eat anymore tonight."

"I bet he did."

Rose bounced Iris on her hip. Iris looked up at Jericho. "Hi," she said.

Jericho smiled. His size usually made little kids scared but this tyke wasn't a bit shy. "Well, hello there, Iris. Another sister?" he asked Rose.

She grinned. "How'd ya guess?"

Rose watched as her father approached.

He hugged and kissed Violet first. "Well done, sweetheart," he said softly. He then hugged and kissed Rose. "You're doing a great job and you waved your arms very well."

Rose laughed. "Thanks, Dad." She glanced up at Jericho. "Um, Dad, I'd like you to meet Jericho Jones, he's in town to teach our first responder workers to up their game. Jericho, this is my father, Keegan Tanner."

Jericho looked her father directly in the eyes and shook his hand. "Sir. It's nice to meet you. Rose has been very kind to invite me here tonight and make me feel welcome in your town."

Keegan nodded. "Nice to meet you too. I've actually already heard all about you and what you're doing here in Pine Forest."

"Of course you have, Daddy," Daisy said with a laugh.

Iris scrambled down out of Rose's arms and went running to see someone else across the room.

Jericho turned his attention to Rose's father, his brow furrowed. "So, your name is Keegan *Tanner*? But, Rose, your name is Anderson?"

Rose nodded with a smile. "Our father, our biological father died in Iraq shortly after Vi and I were born and actually before Lily and Daisy were born." She grabbed Keegan's arm and leaned her head on it in a loving gesture. "This man came into our lives when I was four. He married our mother and became the best father a girl could ever ask for."

Keegan patted her hand. "And they are the best daughters."

Jericho smiled. "They are definitely the most beautiful. But, let me ask, if your name is Tanner, are you related to Gabe Tanner?"

Keegan nodded. “He’s my son, and their brother.”

Jericho looked at Rose. “Why didn’t you tell me he’s your brother?”

She smiled sweetly. “You didn’t ask. Well, you didn’t ask me. You asked Laynah if she knew him.”

He nodded, beginning to understand. “I didn’t ask you because I figured you knew him since he was allowing you to manage his center.”

Rose laughed. “Allowing me? He was grateful to have someone who understands him volunteer to take the job.”

“I stand corrected. So, Violet said you keep things close to the vest. I guess she wasn’t kidding.”

“It’s something she learned from me,” Keegan offered. “There’s no need to go giving your life story out to everyone you meet.”

Rose smiled. “My Daddy runs Ameritech Security.”

Jericho’s mouth opened. “Hmm, for some reason I thought Gabe Tanner’s father was an FBI agent.”

“I was once,” Keegan said. “Like, almost twenty years ago. And I don’t run Ameritech, and Rose knows that, she’s just being silly. Jason Lee and Joey Adams do that. I run a division of Ameritech.”

“Well, Mr. Tanner, let me just say, that it is a real honor to meet you. Your son is an amazing young man and I have a great deal of admiration and respect for him and for the people who raised him. He’s an inspiration.”

Keegan nodded. “Thanks. He can be very inspirational. He’s a good kid. But he’s fallible, as are we all.”

Jericho heaved a sigh. “Don’t I know it.” He looked around at the group. “So, where is he now?”

“He’s in California, staying with the Kinos training to fight in a tournament a week from tomorrow.”

“The Kinos as in Ricky Kino, right? I know he’s dating their daughter.”

Keegan nodded. “Yes.” He glanced at Rose who was looking up at Jericho with admiration in her eyes and he knew they were beginning a new episode in their lives.

At that moment Violet turned to see her guy walking up to the group, holding her little sister. He smiled at her, looking into her eyes, letting her know he was very happy to see her. “What you did with those kids, Vi, you were amazing.”

“Were you here?”

“No, but I pulled over and watched it livestream. You’re so talented.”

Violet smiled and offered her cheek for him to kiss, since her father was standing right there. She turned to introduce him to the newcomer in the town but was silenced by his words.

“CJ?” Jericho said.

CJ Blackmon turned and looked at the man who called his name. His face visibly paled. He didn’t smile. He handed Iris over to Violet. “JJ,” he answered flatly.

Jericho smiled brightly. “CJ, man, it’s so good to see you. What are you

doing here in Pine Forest?" He offered his hand.

CJ sighed heavily and didn't shake it. "I live here. I work for Ameritech," he said nodding toward Keegan. "And I just stopped in real quick to see Violet, but I just remembered I have some reports I have to file. If you'll all excuse me," he turned and walked away.

The group watched him leave. Violet's mouth was open in surprise, not knowing what to think. Everyone turned their eyes to Jericho. He was lowering the hand that CJ left hanging, and looking after CJ, watching him as he exited the gym. He looked back at everyone staring at him. Sighing, he realized they were all waiting for an explanation.

"Um, well that was a surprise," he said softly. "A blast from the past, I think they say."

No one said anything.

He blew out a breath. "CJ and I, we, uh, we grew up together. I mean, in the same neighborhood, up in Rome — Georgia."

"He didn't seem too happy to see you," Rose pointed out.

Jericho's brow furrowed. "No, he didn't, did he?" He sighed and shook his head. "We lost touch with each other right after we graduated from high school. We'd actually been best friends."

"He didn't appear too friendly now," Daisy said.

"I, uh, yeah, I don't understand," Jericho said. "But I intend to find out."

"Did you two have a fight or something?" Violet asked, her voice shaky.

Jericho shook his head. "No. I mean, we didn't fight. However, something did happen, but if you all don't know about it, I guess he doesn't want you to know about it. So, I guess I need to shut up now."

He glanced up at Mr. Tanner, who wasn't smiling, and he had a feeling that he did know something. Jericho took a step back. "Well, I guess I'd better be off. I have an early start scheduled for tomorrow." He held out his hand to Keegan. "It was a pleasure meeting you, sir, and your daughters."

Keegan nodded and shook his hand. "Nice meeting you, too. I'm sure we'll meet again soon."

Jericho nodded and shook each girl's hand, saving Rose for last. Finally, he turned and took her hand. "Thank you, Rose, for inviting me tonight. I had a great time and I really enjoyed you waving your arms."

She laughed. "You're welcome. Come by the center anytime."

"Thank you. I just might do that." He turned abruptly and took his leave.

The family watched him go, and then turned to Violet. "You okay, honey?" Rose asked.

She nodded, tears glistening in her eyes. "I guess so. I don't understand what happened. He didn't even say goodbye to me."

"He was surprised and flustered by seeing Jericho," Keegan said. "Don't take it personally. Remember, you asked me about his past? Well, it's come back to haunt him. Give him a chance to explain. Something did happen. But CJ wasn't in the wrong. And as far as I know, neither was Jericho, though I have some investigating to do."

"Can't you just tell me, Dad?" Violet asked.

"I've already told you, Violet, he works for me. His past is confidential. I cannot breach protocol."

"But you could tell *me* about *Jericho*, right?" Rose answered.

Keegan smiled at his smart daughter. "I have no problem doing that. I'll get back to you. Now, let's get this place cleaned up and locked up and go home."

Rose nodded. "The kitchen manager has the kitchen about done, and Mrs. Murphy, with Lucas, and Charlie and Matt Stewart have already seen to all the classrooms, taken out the trash, locked all the doors, put up all the tables and chairs out of here and gone home. So, I just need to do a walk, and make sure we haven't missed anything on my checklist."

Keegan smiled. "You have a closing checklist. You're being very professional about this, aren't you?"

"Dad, you know I don't do anything halfway, and you know this first community center for Gabe, it's part of his legacy, and it has to go off without a hitch."

Keegan nodded. "I love the way you protect your brother. I'm proud of you, Rosey."

Rose smiled. "The feeling is mutual."

✝✝✝

Psalm 34:18

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

Chapter Thirteen

October 31st, 6:45 PM, Thursday Evening
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Gabe and Taylor stood out on the deck looking out over the water as the sun began to set. Dinner was over and Gabe, for some reason, was extra tired. He'd wanted to go straight to bed, but Taylor was very excited about her first dance class.

"And so, this Ginny girl," Gabe said. "Did she turn out to actually be nice?"

Taylor laughed. "Well, I mean, she likes to tell it like it is. She's honest. She can be a little harsh. But I like her. I think she's like, been around a long time, and she needs to feel important. From what I could tell, she gives any new student a hard time, especially if she feels they're getting special treatment. But that's okay with me, because the harder they are on me, the faster I learn."

"That's a very Kino thing to say. So, then, did you learn a lot today?"

"I really did. Madam Janine, that's my actual teacher, she's young, and oh my goodness, she can dance, like, amazing. I'm gonna learn the basics of ballet first, and then she'll bring in the elements of contemporary, and eventually, all the styles. I'm so excited."

Gabe smiled at her. "I'm happy for you, Tay."

She frowned. "Am I boring you?"

He shook his head, his brow furrowed. "No, why would you say that?"

"Because you don't seem too interested."

"I am very interested, but I'm also very tired, so maybe that's what you're picking up on."

She nodded. "I bet you are. How did training go today?"

"It actually wasn't that hard of a day. Grandmaster Kino is tapering off."

"So, why are you so tired?"

"Good question."

"So, what was dad talking about at dinner, that they're gonna have to get some more security. Did something happen?"

"Not really. It's just that when we went outside today to head home, this large group of girls and paparazzi charged at us. They practically bowled me over. They had their hands all over me. It was pretty embarrassing."

Taylor frowned.

Gabe shook his head. "I really don't get girls these days. I mean, it's like girls are so shallow, and they complain about guys all the time and insist they be called queens or princesses and that we should treat them like royalty, but

don't dare try to hold a door for them, but we'd better spend all our money on them, but they don't have to do anything to gain our respect, but they can be disrespectful to us, and they don't even know their own place. But don't forget that girls are equal to us in every way, and we'd better not forget it, and I think they're just freakin' crazy."

He drew a sharp breath when Taylor smacked him. "Ow!" He looked at Taylor with surprise. "Did you just hit me because you're mad at what I said, or were you playing around?"

She frowned. "I hit you because I'm mad at what you said." She smiled sheepishly. "But really I'm only playfully mad, and actually, I *did* think that you'd block it."

He rubbed his cheek. "Well, I didn't see it coming."

"Why not?"

He shook his head. "I just didn't. Ya know, that's part of what I'm talkin' about. It's not fair."

"What's not fair?"

"You got mad at me and hit me. If I got mad at you and hit you, I'd already be dead and buried."

"That's a little bit of an exaggeration," Taylor said.

"Only a little bit," he countered.

She pouted. "Why this sudden thing against girls?"

He sighed. "Sorry. I actually don't have a thing against girls. Really. I love you. I love my sisters and mom, and your mom, and all of the women I know personally. But like, when that group of girls charged me today, one of them like, grabbed me."

"Grabbed you?"

"Yeah, I mean— grabbed me." He placed his hand on his crotch.

Taylor's mouth fell open.

"I mean, if I did that to a girl, I'd be arrested. But as a guy, I'm supposed to just take it. And it kinda pisses me off. Girls suck."

She smacked him again.

"Ow, Taylor. Stop it."

"Oh, Gabe, I'm sorry. I was totally playin' that time and totally expected you to block it."

He smiled, but shook his head. "I didn't see it coming."

"Again, why not?"

"Taylor Kino!" Bree called from the kitchen window.

Before Taylor could answer, her mother was out on the deck. "Did you just hit Gabe?"

Gabe jumped in. "She did, but she was just playing. She thought I would block it."

"Why didn't you?" Ricky asked from behind his wife.

Gabe shrugged. "I didn't see it coming."

"Why not?"

"I think I'm just tired."

"Well then, you need to head to bed."

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm on my way." He looked at Taylor. "Hey Tay, I'm sorry I'm so tired. I know you were looking forward to us spending some time together tonight."

"It's okay. Go get some rest. I'm sorry I hit you. I really did think you'd block. You usually don't let me get the upper hand."

Gabe nodded. "I'll do better next time." He kissed her softly. "Night, Tay."

"Good night."

Gabe went up to bed. Taylor stayed and helped her mom and Desi with the dishes while Jordan sat at the high counter and chatted with them, trying to explain why she felt the need to sleep out under the stars the night before.

Young Eric, his father and Alec sat at the kitchen table, eating a second helping of apple pie, sent to them from Jordan's mom. The men were talking about the girls who'd charged both Gabe and young Eric as they'd left the Newport studio.

This got Taylor's attention and she turned and told them what Gabe had told her, about the one girl who'd grabbed him, and how he'd be arrested if he'd done that to a girl.

"Well," Ricky began. "It's true, he'd be arrested. Most states have made the sexual assault laws gender-neutral. So, legally, Gabe has just as much right as a woman does to say nobody gets to put their hands on him without permission. Socially, though, people sometimes treat the same behavior differently when the victim is male, and that's what Gabe is talking about. It's a double standard, but in some ways, there is a double standard for a reason. Do you understand why that is, Taylor?"

She shrugged. "I guess because men are stronger and can pretty much protect themselves."

"Yes, and it's not a legal issue. It's because, no matter what women these days are trying to say, men and women are not equal, they are not the same. Women must be protected. By laws and by men. But Gabe is not wrong, there is a shallowness lately, that is being emphasized, though it's not just women who are shallow. Satan is working overtime to distort the sexes and to destroy the relationships between men and women. That destroys the family unit, and *that* destroys humanity. It topples governments and it causes mass destruction."

"So, Dad, what's the answer?"

"The answer is fairly easy. Be who God created you to be. Men, work hard to be the best you can be, to be strong so that you can take care of and protect the females in your life, physically, financially, and spiritually. Women, work hard to be the best you can be, so that you can take care of the men in your lives in the same ways. And both of them need to be in control of their sexual urges. Men stop trying to conquer every virgin you see. And women, don't deliberately use sexuality to manipulate attention, and then be all offended when a man tries to take you up on your offer. But also, men, don't ever mistake appearance or flirtation for permission. And 'no' really does mean 'no.' Both sides need to have self-control and respect. In a perfect world where

we follow God's laws, this would not be an issue."

Bree smiled at her wise husband. "Ya know, Taylor, I smacked your dad a few times."

"You did?"

Ricky smiled. "Yeah, she's stronger than she looks."

"But Dad, why didn't you block it?"

"This was different," Ricky argued. "I absolutely deserved it." He grinned. "Both times. More the second time than the first time."

Taylor smiled. "Tell us about it."

"Well, the first time, she was only nineteen and I walked in on her when she was on a date with some guy and I was jealous and said some smart alec kind of things."

"She smacked you right in front of the guy?" Jordan asked.

"No, she waited until the next time she saw me and knocked the crap out of me."

Young Eric chuckled. "And what about the other time?"

"She was like, twenty-seven. Right before we got together," Ricky began. "And I said something very offensive to her, which I will not repeat."

"He still didn't deserve it," Bree said. "He won't repeat it because even though it was offensive, it was the truth. I was young and had a temper and struck out, but that is still no excuse. It was wrong. I was in the wrong, and that's why I called you out, Taylor."

Taylor nodded as she thought. "Well, when I hit Gabe today, I was half playing and I really did think he'd block it."

"That's actually a good point," Ricky said. "You trusted him to be strong and quick and block it, and he didn't. He should have. That trust is important. You have to know that he's at the top of his game."

"Yeah, but I feel really bad about it."

"Good. You should," Ricky and Bree said at the same time.

Taylor nodded. "And ya know what? He wasn't even mad at me."

"That's because he's a good guy," young Eric put in.

"Yeah he is. I asked him why he didn't block it and he said he thought it was because he was so tired."

"Then maybe you two shouldn't go to the homecoming game tomorrow, or the dance on Saturday," Ricky said as he winked at his wife.

Taylor gasped. "You're kidding, Dad! I'm on the homecoming court and I have to walk out on the field and Gabe is gonna escort me and that's all there is to it. We're going."

He laughed. "Yes, I'm kidding. And we wouldn't miss it."

Young Eric chuckled. "I can't wait to see my pretty little sister walk across that football field and own the place."

Taylor smiled. "I don't know about all that. But still, we're going."

"Well maybe you'd better apologize to Gabe then," Bree said.

Taylor nodded. "I will."

Two hours later at 10:00 PM, Taylor slipped out of her bedroom and down

the hall and opened Gabe's door.

He turned over and watched her come into his room. This was the exact reason her father had asked him to stay at Grandmaster Kino's home most of the week. Not that he didn't want her to come to him. He did. But he had to be very strong and very careful.

"Gabe?" Taylor whispered.

"Hey Tay."

"Did I wake you?"

"It's okay. I'm happy to see you."

She came to the bed and he automatically raised the cover, essentially inviting her in. She scooted in beside him and immediately put her hand on his face. "I just wanted to apologize."

"For what?"

"For hitting you."

"It's okay. You're right, I should've blocked it, then you wouldn't have anything to apologize for."

"I wasn't really mad at what you said."

"I know. It's okay, babe."

"You're such a good guy, Gabe. You almost never get mad about anything."

"Sure I do. Just not at you."

"I can make mistakes."

"Yeah, but you making a mistake shouldn't make me mad."

"I talked to my mom and dad about the double standard and I'm still not sure I understand."

He sighed. Suddenly, he rose up and kissed her. He pushed her onto her back and lay on top of her, kissing her deeply. He raised his head and looked into her eyes.

She smiled. "What are you doing?"

"I've just decided I'm gonna make love to you."

"What?"

He didn't repeat himself, only bent his head and kissed her again while working his thighs between her legs. Then he moved his hand up under her nightshirt and grabbed the waistband of her panties. Finally, he stilled. "I thought you'd block me," he quoted.

Her eyes blinked up at him.

"Get it now?"

"Yes," she whispered.

Gabe eased himself off of her.

Taylor frowned. "It's not fair. We should respect each other and be able to trust each other to only have each other's best interest in mind."

He pulled her close. "Right. And Taylor, you need to stop me. Don't let me ruin our future. Help me to be strong."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I trust you, and if you thought it was time, I wasn't gonna question you."

"Question me, Tay. Please."

"I'll try. But you keep being strong too."

"I will."

She snuggled up under his chin and they fell asleep. An hour later though, Taylor woke back up. She was sweating. Gabe was so hot. And not in a good way. "Gabe?" she whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Gabe, you're burning up."

He moaned. "Yeah, I don't feel too good."

"I'm gonna get mom."

When he didn't argue, she knew she had to do it quickly. She ran down the stairs to her parents' bedroom.

"Mom?" she said as she poked her head in.

"What's wrong?" Bree asked immediately as she sat up.

"Gabe is sick. He's burning up."

Both Bree and Ricky jumped out of bed, grabbed up the thermometer, some ibuprofen and a bottle of water and headed up to Gabe's room.

Bree reached over and touched Gabe's forehead. "Good grief," she mumbled as she pointed the thermometer at him. "103.6," she announced. "Ricky, get Jeffy on the phone."

"Gabe?" Bree said softly. "Can you open your eyes for me?"

Gabe blinked and did as she asked.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not too good. Mostly sleepy and achy all over."

"Sore throat?"

"No, ma'am."

"Headache?"

"Umm, yes, ma'am."

"Nausea?"

He breathed deeply. "Yes, ma'am."

Ricky put the phone on speaker.

"Bree, sorry, but Cam won't let me come over."

"As well he shouldn't. Can you do like, a remote thing?"

"Yes. I know I can pick up on Gabe because I've read him so often." She was silent a moment. "Well, he's burning up. Did you take his temp?"

"103.6," Bree answered quickly. "No sore throat, but he has a headache and some nausea."

"Okay, well from what I can see, I believe he has a virus and not a bacterial infection. Which means it just has to run its course. But we need to get the fever down a little. I'd rather use my own brand fever reducer and cool compresses, but that means someone will have to stay with him and keep changing out the compresses."

Bree looked up at Taylor. "Sweetie, will you go get me a bowl of water and some washcloths and grab that bottle of Jeffy's Febriseed in the middle-right cabinet in the kitchen."

Taylor ran out of the room.

Jeffy continued. "Bree, don't let young Eric or Jordan, or Alec and especially not Desi near him. It's probably just a stomach bug, and also probably very contagious."

A few minutes later Taylor came back in the room and watched as her mother dipped a cloth in the water, wrung it out, folded it, and placed it on Gabe's forehead. Then dipped a second cloth, wrung it out, and placed it on his chest. He sighed and relaxed.

Jeffy breathed deep. "He's gonna be okay, but it's not gonna be fun, and he may vomit, so have something ready for him, and—oh man, Taylor, sweetie, I feel like you have it too."

"I feel fine."

"You won't in about an hour."

"Jeffy," Ricky began. "When Gabe left the studio today, a bunch of people rushed him. They got right up on him. Just wondering, what if they infected him with something, I mean, like, on purpose."

"You're talking about some kind of bio-terrorism attack on Gabe?"

"It popped into my head."

"It's possible. If his condition worsens, we'll have to take him to the hospital and run tests. So, has he been threatened recently? Are you thinking Black is back at it?"

"No, and I hope not. Like I said, it just popped into my head."

"Was young Eric with Gabe when he was rushed?"

"Actually, yes. And as far as I know, he's okay. Though I think I'll go check on him real quick."

"Yes, go do that. But because I believe Taylor is sick, it feels like something the two of them picked up together."

"Taylor," Bree asked. "Please run down and get me two bottles of water. One to refresh the bowl and the other for Gabe to drink."

Taylor nodded and did so quickly, but when she came back she was breathing hard. Bree looked her over and took her temp. "Um, well, Taylor has a temp of 101," Bree reported to Jeffy.

Ricky came back. "Both Eric and Jordan have no symptoms."

"Taylor has a fever," Bree informed him.

Ricky nodded. "Okay then. Tell ya what, Bree, you go with Taylor. Get her into bed. I'll go get another bowl and some washcloths and bring them to you and you can stay with Taylor, I'll stay with Gabe."

Bree nodded. "Fun stuff. I'm goin' in the other room, Jeffy. Thanks, hon."

"No worries, Bree. Oh, and everyone keep your hands washed and clean. Love you, Bree."

"Love you too."

"Ricky," Jeffy said.

"Yep, I'm here."

"Go ahead and get what Bree needs but leave your phone on here, I wanna try to talk to Gabe."

"He's all yours," Ricky said as he ran downstairs.

"Gabe?" Jeffy said.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Feelin' pretty bad?"

"Not as bad as I felt when I was in the hospital."

"Okay, that's good to know. So, when those people rushed at you outside the studio today, do you remember anything specifically?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"One of the girls, she like, grabbed me, I mean, like..."

"You don't have to finish, I can see it. So, I want you to think really hard. When that happened, did you notice anything else? Any peculiar smells?"

"Not that I noticed."

"Okay, that's good. Just think about that time for a minute and let me try to read you."

"Okay."

Jeffy was silent for several moments. "Okay, buddy, thanks."

"What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that the reason the girl grabbed you was to distract you while someone else delivered a toxin to you."

"And do you think they did?"

"No. I think you're good."

"Okay, thanks. Uh, Dr. Kino, can you connect to Taylor and tell if she's gonna be okay?"

Jeffy was silent. Finally, she spoke. "Taylor is sick, maybe not quite as severely as you. She's gonna be okay."

Gabe sighed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Sleep, sweetie. By morning I think you're gonna feel a whole lot better."

"Yes, ma'am."

✝✝✝

November 1st, 6:00 AM, Friday Morning

Stewart Ranch, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jericho Jones thought hard as he drove his truck toward the Stewart ranch. He'd had a rough night, tossing and turning, trying to figure out what was going through CJ's mind. The last time Jericho had seen him was in a hospital. CJ had come into the room, asked him how he was doing and when he'd be discharged from the hospital. He'd apologized to him profusely and left. Jericho had never seen him again. Not for ten years. Jericho had tried to track him down, but CJ obviously didn't want to be found. Jericho finally had to give up and focus on trying to make something of his own life. And, now, here he is, CJ, living in Pine Forest. Maybe that's why Jericho had felt led to come to Pine Forest. Maybe it was so he could find Carson Josiah Blackmon.

So now what, Jericho thought. CJ obviously wasn't happy to see him. He was gonna have to corner him, speak to him, and find out what is going

through his head. And he would, because it seemed obvious that God wanted him to see CJ. However, this morning was a bonding morning with some of the town members, as he'd been invited by John Appel to come and join them at the ranch where they gather to shoot guns most every Friday and Saturday mornings.

He drove until he saw the gate, turned right and saw several cars parked off to the left and several people standing around as one person shot at a target about thirty yards away. His eyes settled at the shooter. It was a female. She wore jeans and a sweatshirt. He recognized the sweatshirt first, and then her face came into focus. Rose. She had on ear and eye protection, and a Braves baseball cap, but he could still see that it was her. She stepped back from the makeshift counter and was practicing a quick draw from the waistband of her jeans. And she was good at it. Very good at it.

Her friend, Melaynah Stewart Appel, he remembered, spoke to her, and Rose nodded. Then Rose said something else to her and Melaynah nodded, stood ready, and drew. Jericho nodded. The redhead was also pretty good at it, though a man stepped in and corrected her form.

Jericho parked and walked up to the group while the ladies still practiced. He was greeted warmly by John Appel.

"Jericho, nice to see you again. Glad you could make it."

Jericho smiled broadly. "Me too." He glanced at Rose. "I didn't realize the ladies would be here."

"Does that bother you?"

"Not at all. But they're good. I hope I can keep up."

"Don't we all. Let me introduce you to everyone."

They turned and waited for Rose to finish firing off her last six shots, drop her magazine and lay the pistol down.

"Hey everyone, this is Jericho Jones. I invited him to join us today."

Rose and Laynah turned with smiles on their pretty faces.

"These two I know," Jericho said as he shook their hands.

Then he was introduced to Chaz Stewart and his sons, Charlie and Matt Stewart. A moment later, Keegan Tanner arrived.

"So," John began. "We used to have my son, Jake, and Keegan's son, Gabe, with us, and they were always fun to watch. But Rose and Laynah are not slouches and Charlie and Matt are about to come into their own. Especially Charlie, since he's older."

"How old are you, Charlie?" Jericho asked.

"I'm fourteen. I just started high school."

"Well, us girls are about done," Rose said. "We have work to do, but just wanna shoot one more thing."

They all watched as Melaynah picked up the AR from off the counter. She squeezed off fifteen rounds.

Chaz smiled broadly at his daughter. "Fifteen rounds, fifteen pings. Good job, Bugs."

She laid the weapon down and smiled sweetly. "Thanks, Daddy."

Rose stepped up, picked up the weapon and did the exact same thing, finishing out the magazine. She laid the weapon down, stepped back, took off her eye and ear protection and threw it into a camo bag.

"Good shootin', Rose," Keegan said.

She smiled and kissed her father's cheek. "Thanks, Daddy, gotta get goin'. Lots to do." She glanced at Jericho. "Well, have a nice day."

"Thanks, you too, Rose. That was remarkable."

She gave a soft laugh. "Thanks. Not so remarkable since I've been shooting since I was seven."

"What's remarkable is when she does the fast shot course over at the *Eagle Eye Gun Club*," Keegan said with pride.

"I'd love to see that one day," Jericho said. "For now, though, Rose Rose, can I buy you a cup of coffee later?"

"Wow, you work fast," she quipped.

"I get the feeling that I need to, because if I don't, you'll take the lead."

"Good assessment," Keegan said quietly.

The words made Jericho smile.

"Well you can buy me some coffee as long as it's early. Once we open at nine, I won't take a break until at least one."

Jericho nodded and glanced at his watch. "How about I pick you up at the center at eight?"

"Sounds like a plan. See you then."

"See you soon, Rose."

She smiled. "Bye everyone. Y'all have a great day." She hugged Melaynah and hugged her father and took her leave.

"I have to go too," Laynah said. "Still have half the horses to do and breakfast to cook for Mom." She kissed her father's cheek. "Charlie, Matt, y'all have a good day at school. Uncle John, Uncle Keegan, y'all have a good day too. Jericho, nice to see you again."

Jericho nodded and watched the gorgeous red-head walk away, then turned to the men. "Uncle?"

"Our three families," John began. "We've been close friends since before the kids were born, and we're always around each other, and it just seems like we're all related."

"One big happy family," Chaz added.

"And you all live nearby?"

"I live at the Inn, the next property over, and Keeg lives on the other side of me, so, we're all neighbors."

"Well now, that sounds like a great setup."

Chaz nodded as he carefully watched Charlie lay out his guns and ammo.

Jericho also watched closely, the trainer in him looking for safety issues, but this group obviously took safety seriously and also were at the top of their game. When Charlie finished shooting, Jericho was highly impressed.

"Wow," Jericho said. "And he's only fourteen."

Charlie turned and grinned at Jericho. "This ain't nothin' compared to

Gabe. To be as good as him, that's my goal."

"I heard he's won a few shooting awards. Is he really that good?"

All the men simply smiled. "He's only won a few shooting trophies because he decided he didn't want the accolades. He's good. Like, sharpshooter or even sniper level good if he had the training," John answered.

"Which he's about to get at Ameritech," Keegan added.

"He just has a natural talent for it," Chaz said. "He's really fun to watch."

"Everything I hear about him, I mean he sounds superhuman."

"Oh, he's human enough. Just ask his mom. Still, he *is* a special kid," Keegan said softly.

"Agreed," John and Chaz said.

"He's my hero," Matt quipped.

"Wow, thanks a lot," Charlie said.

Matt shrugged. "Get as good as him and you'll be my hero."

"Challenge accepted," Charlie said with a nod.

✝✝✝

November 1st, Very Early Friday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky looked down at his sleeping wife. It'd been a difficult night. Ricky had stayed with Gabe, working to bring his fever down and holding a trash can under his chin when he'd had to throw up. After about an hour, Gabe's fever was down, Ricky left the young man sleeping comfortably to check on Taylor.

Taylor's fever was also down and she too had thrown up once. But one look at his wife and Ricky knew that Bree too was suddenly not feeling very well. He'd led her to one of the upstairs empty bedrooms so that he could easily move between the three patients.

He'd gone back to check on the kids several times, but now, at about 5:30 AM, it seemed the crisis was over. He gathered the bowls of water and the wash cloths and the plastic liners from trash cans and went down to the kitchen to clean things up. He looked up as young Eric came down the stairs.

"Good morning, Dad," Eric said brightly. "How's Gabe?"

Ricky went on to explain his night.

"Wow. Well, you need to get some sleep."

"Yes, I do. I've already spoken to Dad. You won't mind if I'm not there this one day, right?"

"No, of course not. When I asked you to stick by my side, I guess I was feeling a little puny after the kidnapping. You're excused. I'm sure you have more important things to do."

"You are as important as they come, son, and I love being there with you as you train. Those are good times. However, I will take this one day off."

Young Eric started making himself a smoothie.

"So," Ricky began. "Is Jordan feeling any better?"

Young Eric shook his head. "I'm not sure. I mean, as long as I'm around she's okay. She came to my room last night shortly after we all went to bed, and I'm sorry, but I didn't have the heart to make her leave. I realize I'm in

your house, and you want me to follow God's rules, and I am, I promise, I'm not being intimate with her, I just don't have the heart to send her away."

"We'll talk about that in a minute. For now, I'm simply concerned about a very special young lady. If you think she needs to be with you, I trust you."

Young Eric smiled at his father. He'd been up all night taking care of his family, and here he is, needing to sleep, but still trying to serve others by checking on Jordan's welfare. He nodded. "Thanks, Dad. It's like, the things she says, it sounds so weird. It's like she's being haunted. Not just by nightmares of the Clark guy trying to choke the life out of her, but she says 'they' want her dead. She talks about Clark like he's a bunch of people. She even says she hears like, a bunch of people talking and whispering and they all wanna hurt her and they all want her dead."

Ricky shook his head. "That doesn't sound good, Eric. Jeffy said there's a demon. Sounds like more than one. I think I'd like to consult with Dad and Jeffy, and then maybe get some of us together to pray over Jordan, lay hands on her and bless her."

"Why would demons be targeting Jordan?"

"Think about it and tell me the answer to that question."

Young Eric turned on the blender and thought while his smoothie was churning. Finally he turned it off and answered. "Because God brought Jordan and me together, we're supposed to be together and that is not just so that we can have a happy, easy life together, but because together we're supposed to do good works for God and the demons don't want us to do that."

"Yes, and there's something only the two of you can do. Something that no one else except you two can do."

"What?"

"Again, think and tell me the answer."

Young Eric poured his smoothie into his large insulated cup. He shook his head. "It's not coming to me."

"Well, I'm tired, so I'm just gonna tell you," Ricky said with a smile. "Only you and Jordan can have the children that you and Jordan are supposed to have. Your DNA is important. It's God's life blueprint for you and for Jordan, and together for your children. Not that reproduction is your sole spiritual purpose. Still, whatever your children are supposed to accomplish in this world, if God brought you together, then He wants yours and Jordan's DNA to create your children. The plan is always much more involved than we can understand. But we have to trust God completely. You believe He brought you together, right?"

"Yes, sir. I don't just believe it. I feel like I know it."

Ricky nodded. "Then you two being together is part of a larger plan. Just like Bree and I being together was part of a larger plan. The things our children are gonna do in this world, who knows? But it's part of a plan, and I'm here to make sure God's plan comes to pass. So, I'll ensure not only yours and Taylor's safety, but also the safety and well-being of those chosen for you."

"Meaning, Gabe and Jordan," young Eric asked.

"Exactly. And I'm not just talking about your physical safety. In Ephesians 6:12 it says, 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.' Did you hear that part– against rulers of the darkness? I believe that's what we're up against. So, right now, we will get together in force and fight for Jordan."

Young Eric breathed out a sigh. "Thanks, Dad. I mean it. I'm so thankful that you're my father. I'm so thankful God sent me to be your son. I'm so blessed by you. Your strength, your example of how to be a man, I don't think I'll ever be able to live up to it, but you make me wanna try."

Ricky gave a soft laugh. "Now I have to say, that is very humbling, to hear those words from your mouth, because those are the words I've said to my own father many times."

"Hopefully, one day my own children will say that," young Eric said.

"I'm sure they will," Ricky said with a smile. "And hopefully, our true Father, our Creator, will one day say to all of us, 'Well done thou good and faithful servants.'"

Young Eric nodded.

"Now, one more thing before I go get some sleep," Ricky began. "You spoke earlier about this being my house, my rules kinda thing."

Young Eric sighed. "Yes, and I don't mean to break your rules, so maybe I need to start looking..."

"Stop. Just listen, because there's something you need to hear. This house, is YOUR home. I know the thoughts you're having. You think you're about to be twenty-one and maybe it's time for you to stop living with your parents and find a home of your own. And you certainly can do that if you're just itching to get away from us. There is this thought process going on in the world today though, that if a young man still lives with his parents then he is not a real man. I thought the same thing when I was a little older than you. About twenty-five, twenty-six."

Young Eric nodded.

"It's a lie. For the world, one of the main reasons for moving out on your own would be to give you the privacy you need to date, to bring a young woman home with you and do whatever you want to do without having to answer to anyone— anyone but God that is.

"Now, maybe your reason to move out on your own is better than that. Maybe you feel ready to establish your own righteous world, your own kingdom, so to speak, your own space, with your tastes, your identity. And that's cool. I get that. And if that's what you want to do, I say 'go for it.' But what I'm trying to say is, there is no pressure to do that. Staying here with your father and mother does not make you less of a man. When you marry, that's different. When you marry, in an ideal situation, you move out and make a new home with your wife. Yet, sometimes a couple may struggle financially and stay with their parents while they save money for a down payment for a home, or to get through college. That also does not make someone less of a man.

Remember, whatever current trend the world is taking, don't buy into that. What you do in your life is solely between you and God. The world, full of lies and deceit and promiscuity and perversion, is hardly a credible source to judge what is a good and responsible man."

Young Eric nodded in understanding. "Still, Dad, maybe I'm just aware that the parents might be ready for the kids to leave, get out from underfoot."

Ricky shook his head. "That's the other part of the lie. The world has parents thinking that if their children are still at home after they turn eighteen, then their children are irresponsible and the parents are 'stuck' with them. And yeah, there certainly are children who don't have a plan, who just stay at home and freeload off their parents. And that's a different situation than I'm talking about, and those parents have neglected to help their children mature and learn responsibility.

"But let's say the children have a plan, but they lack the funds to live on their own. But they are learning a trade, or going to college, or learning a skill. They are learning and planning and growing. Take a look at Desi and Alec. They made a mistake. But neither parent stepped in to actually help with the situation. If either parent had simply offered their assistance with Desi, while Alec went to school, the kids wouldn't have gone homeless and been struggling to survive. I mean, each parent had an extra room in their homes. Desi could have lived there, offered to work some menial job to pay a little bit of rent, while Alec got his education."

Ricky sighed. "The point is, there is not just one right answer. And the lie that parents have failed if their children aren't out of the house forces parents to make stupid decisions that are not helpful. And then, there are the parents who want the children gone so that they can go off and travel finally, or not have to worry about taking care of the children anymore, and be free to do whatever they want. How ridiculous is that?"

"What do you mean? Is it wrong for adults to want to travel and see the world or have a vacation?"

"No, it's not wrong, unless it becomes the sole priority. Taking long, expensive vacations is not more important than your children. Just like making money, making a good living is not wrong, unless the accumulation of money and riches becomes your priority. We can't let our priorities get out of whack. So, take a vacation if you want, but just remember this, Eric, we were not placed on this Earth just to have fun. To learn joy, yes, but not to constantly seek fun. Having fun isn't the purpose of existence. We were not placed here to be entertained, to travel around and see the world, to eat in exclusive restaurants, drive fancy cars or to lie on soft mattresses. We were placed here to learn love and compassion, and to be in service, and to choose between light and darkness and to find *true* joy, which you and I both know doesn't come from a lavish lifestyle, but instead, comes only through a connection to our heavenly Father.

"Don't be seduced by the world. And back to the parents who just want their children out of the house. They need to question their own motives. I can

guarantee that your mother and I, would welcome you and Taylor to live here always. It would be no strain on us at all. We will serve you and teach you and never go on another vacation. However, because our priorities are with God, you will have learned responsibilities and you will want to marry and establish your own kingdom. 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife...' I know it seems that I'm going around in circles, and that's because I'm talking about the circle of life. A man and woman, love, create, establish, and then their progeny do the same. Expanding. Creating. Creation is what God does, and what He has us do. It's part of His plan. In summary, son, don't fall for the lies of the world. Listen only to God."

Young Eric nodded. "I know that if I follow God's will for me, I will be truly happy. That, I know."

Ricky smiled. "If it's God's will, then you can't go wrong. So pray and listen." He shook his head as if he'd been in a trance. "I'm proud of you, son. And now, I'm gonna run up and check on everyone and then go to bed."

They both looked up as Bree came down the stairs.

"Mom! How are you feeling?"

"Bree?" Ricky said.

"I'm fine. Feeling good as new. Really. I'm ready to start on my day. Ricky, my love, go get some sleep. I've got this."

"Are you sure?"

"I am. And thank you for taking care of us. I'm so grateful for you."

He nodded. "And I'm grateful for you and that you feel better and you're welcome and good night– I mean good morning."

He blew a kiss, turned and headed down the hall.

Bree smiled after him and sighed. "That is one good man," she said softly.

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, he is."

✝✝✝

1 Timothy 6:17-19

"As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty,
nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches,
but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.
They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to
share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation
for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life."

Chapter Fourteen

November 1st, 8:00 AM, Friday Morning
Gabe Tanner Community Center, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jericho held the door open for Rose as she climbed into his truck and Rose gave Jericho directions to her favorite coffeehouse, which was only one street over from Main Street. He looked up at the sign as they drove up and parked out front. "*Front Porch Coffee*," he read aloud. "I have to say, that's a great name and gives an instant thought of morning coffee on the front porch as neighbors walk by and wave 'good morning.'"

Rose nodded. "It's perfect, isn't it? I love this place."

They walked up the sidewalk and up the front porch steps of what obviously used to be an old home. The large wrap-around porch was wide and had six small, round tables, each with two chairs, currently all occupied. They headed in. The aromas of fresh-brewed-coffee and breakfast muffins baking made him smile. "Man, it smells good in here."

Rose giggled. "So, so good."

A woman, about forty-ish, wearing a pink and green striped apron greeted them with a smile. "Hey, good morning, y'all! What can I get for ya, Rose?"

"I'll have my usual," Rose said.

"What's your usual?" Jericho asked.

"It's called a coffee float. And it's like, this large mug half filled with soft serve vanilla ice cream and then they pour the coffee over the ice cream. So yummy," Rose said. "Wanna try it?"

He smiled. "No, don't think I can do that yet," he said as he perused the menu above his head. "I think I'll do the Pumpkin spice special. Large. And I think I'm gonna have to try one of those muffins," he said as he pointed to a glass case. "They smell so good."

"You won't be sorry. Apple cinnamon, banana nut, or cream cheese and chocolate?" the woman asked.

"Banana nut," he answered. "Rose?"

"Nope, just the coffee."

He paid and they started to step aside, but the woman spoke to Rose. "How's your mama?"

"She's okay, but is gonna be very happy once those babies get here."

"Oh, they're here, honey. They just need to come out to play."

Rose laughed. "Indeed."

"Let me know if y'all need anything. Anything at all."

"Thanks, Mrs. Parker."

"And tell Lizzy my mother is makin' her two quilts for the babies."

"Oh, that is so sweet. I'll tell her."

A younger girl at the end of the counter called Rose's name and Jericho grabbed the tray. "Sit where you want, I'll follow," he said.

She chose a table next to the large front window. Rose smiled when he offered to hold the chair for her that would put her back to the door. Which means, he chose the chair that faced the door. He unloaded the tray, took it over to the ledge that held other empty trays and grabbed a few napkins and a plastic spoon, in case she needed it.

He sat down and she smiled at him.

"What?" he asked. "Did I forget something?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm just in my head, comparing you to someone else. Not fair, I know. But hey, unlike my brother, I'm human."

"Well, now you have me intrigued. Who are you comparing me to?"

"A guy I used to date."

"Oh, I see. So, am I doing better or worse?"

She laughed. "Better. Much better. Though back when I was dating him I didn't realize how bad things were." She shrugged. "Live and learn."

He nodded. "I've lived and learned many times, so I understand completely." He watched her as she lifted her cup and sipped the coffee from around the ice cream. She got a tiny bit of ice cream on the tip of her nose. He smiled as she grabbed a napkin and wiped it off.

"So, Jericho Jones," she began. "What's on your agenda for the day?"

"I have a few prospects on some lodging for myself and my men, so I'm gonna meet with a real estate agent and go see what we can find."

"I'm guessing you've already tried the Inn."

"Of course. They're booked up solid through Christmas. But I'm sure we'll find something. What's on your agenda?"

"Well, the first and most important thing I need to do is write up several job descriptions before the job interviews I have scheduled today."

"What positions are you hiring for?"

"I need a maintenance man desperately. Need two more program aides because the center is a lot more popular than we originally assessed. We need one program aide for after-school recreation outside, so, like a retired PE teacher would be great, and then we need someone for like, arts and crafts. But the most important positions we're looking to fill are a licensed behavioral counselor, a licensed assessment counselor, and then we need to find some volunteer on-call attorneys."

"Wow, so you are a very busy lady."

She smiled.

"So, Rose Rose, does the center take up all your time, or do you find time for a personal life?"

She raised an eyebrow at him.

He shrugged. "Just asking so I don't become a nuisance."

"I make time for things that are important, like God, family and friends."

"I like the sound of that," he said with a smile. "So, you like to shoot. What else do you like to do?"

"Let's see. I ride horses. I'm a martial artist. I do lots of yardwork, especially now that Gabe is gone. Instead of Dad and Gabe out workin' on a Saturday morning, it's more like Dad and Rose and sometimes Lily. Before mom got pregnant, she used to work in the flower gardens. But Dad says he's gonna hire someone for this next spring and all mom will have to do is order people around. The only work left to do right now, though, is just get up the rest of the leaves."

He listened carefully as she went on to speak about things that needed doing at their home, in their community, at the center, and for the church. When she stopped speaking, he smiled at her. "You seem to have a very logical, analytical and organized mind."

She laughed. "Why do you say that?"

"You speak about things that need to be done, the time or effort it will take to complete them, and then mentally check them off. You seem like a no-nonsense kind of girl."

She shrugged. "I guess I am. Is that a bad thing?"

"No, it's a great thing."

✝✝✝

8:15AM Friday Morning, Stewart Ranch
Pine Forest, Georgia

Melaynah Stewart headed into the house from the kitchen door and headed straight into the den where her mother's bed had been set up for the last several weeks. "Hey Mom," Laynah said. "Let me wash up and I'll get started on breakfast. And then, it's hair washing day, so I'll take out your braid, and brush your hair and maybe, I'll give you a mani/pedi today too. A day of pampering for my mom, how does that sound? "

Lisa Stewart looked up at her daughter. "It sounds wonderful, sweetie, but I don't think I'm gonna be eating any breakfast or getting my hair done."

"Why not? Don't you feel well?" Laynah asked, immediately concerned.

"I want you to stay calm, Bugs, but I'm having some pretty strong, regular contractions and I've put in a call to my doctor and she should be calling me back any minute."

"Mom, did you take your meds this morning?"

"Yes, sweetheart, but the doc said there will be a time when the babies are not gonna wait any longer."

At that moment Lisa's phone buzzed and she smiled at her daughter as she picked it up. "Hey, Doc," Lisa said casually. "...Yes, they're strong.... well, they're starting to get painful... About a five... Chaz is taking the boys to school, but I'll call him.... okay.... an ambulance it is..... yes.... see you soon." She ended the call and smiled up at her daughter. "We're gonna have some babies today."

Melaynah nodded. "Okay, what do I need to do?"

"The doc wants me to be transported in an ambulance just to be on the safe

side, so they will be here shortly. Call your dad for me, and then go get my bag that's already packed upstairs."

Laynah immediately called her father.

"Hey, Bugs, everything okay?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm about to drop Charlie and Matt off at school. Why?"

"Just come back home. Mom's having contractions and the doc says they're gonna deliver the babies today. Doc is sending an ambulance, just precautionary, so we'll load mom up and follow behind."

"Is she in pain?"

"She doesn't seem to be too uncomfortable. So stay calm and get your butt back here."

Chaz laughed. "It sounds like you're the one that needs to stay calm."

"How long before you get back, Dad?"

"Less than ten minutes, Bugs. Stay calm. And keep your mom calm. Go sit next to her and say a prayer."

"Good idea. Doing it."

✝✝✝

8:33AM Front Porch Coffee Shop

Jericho was enjoying himself immensely as he chatted with Rose. She was sharp, bright, lovely to look at and interesting. He thought of another question, anything to keep her talking.

"So, let me ask you, when I told my guys about you and your family, one of them said you and your sisters were famous. That you made some commercials. Is that true? I'm just asking because you didn't mention it."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't call it famous. The fact that you didn't know about it is evidence of that. We did a media ad for *Twin Wave Beauty* products and they went viral, mostly because we're the sisters of *the* Gabe Tanner. Since then we've just recently been asked to do other commercials, for big companies, and we, my sisters and I, are considering it. Not because we care about being famous or being on TV, but it does pay a lot and we could put that money to good use at the Center."

He nodded with a smile. "I really like the way you think."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you have your priorities straight. You don't seem to buy into the Babylonian culture."

"Meaning?"

"You aren't obsessed with the pursuit of fame and fortune."

"Yeah, that kind of stuff doesn't impress me. The last guy I dated just couldn't understand that."

He looked into her eyes. "You wanna talk about that?"

She shrugged nonchalantly. "Not really, so I'm sorry I mentioned it. It just popped into my mind. But I'll tell you this. He wanted me to be his, well, to let him, um, how do I say this politely? He wanted me to give myself to him in exchange for him making me famous and rich. He told me to stop being old-

fashioned and get over myself. It's the way of the world and I'd better get on board or be left behind." She quieted, sighed.

He realized that obviously, she'd needed to talk about it, even if she didn't want to talk about it. "I'm sorry he spoke to you like that. You realize, of course, that what he was saying, it was like Satan promising Jesus the world."

She nodded. "Yes, I realized it. And that's another thing. Really, the straw that broke the camel's back. He compared God to Santa Claus. He was very irreverent about it, knowing how strongly I feel about God."

Jericho frowned. "Okay, so then, if you don't mind me asking, what got you interested in this guy in the first place?"

She sighed. "He was a young, good-looking, entrepreneur who worked very hard and made something of himself on his own, with no father around. He bought his mother a house. He seemed remarkable. And he was very good at what he did, which was selling. He sold people on people. And I fell for it, for a minute. And then he showed his true colors, and I stepped back and realized he'd never make me happy. It was a learning episode in my life."

He nodded. "So, tell me Rose, what would make you happy?"

Her brows rose and she looked up into his eyes. "That's a mighty deep question for this early in the morning. And I really need to get going."

"Okay, but just tell me one thing. Just one thing that you would like to have in your life."

She sighed. "I guess I'd like to have a marriage like my parents. My father is the best man I've ever known, and if I could meet and marry a man like him, I know I'd be happy."

He smiled. "Well now, that sounds like a big order."

She nodded. "Right?"

Jericho stood and began to gather their cups and napkins. "Would you like anything else before we leave this awesome place?"

She shook her head. "Nope, I'm good. But hey, Jericho Jones, thanks for the coffee."

"It was definitely my pleasure, Rose Rose."

She giggled and they headed out.

They'd just pulled out of their parking space when Rose's phone went off. Noting it was Melaynah, she answered on speaker.

"Hey, Bugs. You're on speaker and I'm with Jericho, so don't say anything inappropriate or rude."

Laynah laughed. "Nothing rude, but something exciting. Guess what I'm doing right now?"

"Um, brushing Santana?"

"Nope. I'm in the car with Dad and Charlie and Matt and Aralyn and we are following behind an ambulance that Mom is in."

"Oh, Bugs, are you guys on the way to the hospital to have those babies?"

"Yes!" Laynah said with glee. "We're all so excited."

"Who all knows yet?"

"Aunt Jodi and your mom."

"Well then that means..."

Rose stopped talking at the sudden loud scream. Then she heard all kinds of talking and the boys yelling. "Laynah! What's going on? Laynah? Laynah, talk to me!"

"Uh, uh, oh God, please help her."

"Laynah, what happened?"

"A, a truck, a cement truck just hit the ambulance. He just pulled right into them, head on. The, the ambulance, it flipped, it flipped a bunch of times. It went down a hill. Oh no, please dear Jesus."

"Laynah, where are you? Laynah, talk to me. I'll get help. Where are you? Are you on Hwy 29? Laynah!"

There was crying and yelling. Laynah sniffed loudly. "Um, yes, Rose, help me. We're uh, we're just past Dad's memorial."

"Got it. Hold on, I'll be right there." She hung up and called 911 and gave them the location.

"Tell them there are three or more adult victims and two unborn children so they will need multiple vehicles," Jericho ordered.

Rose nodded and repeated what he said, then hung up and called Daisy and told her what was happening. "And Daisy, I need you to call Jodi and Gabe, start an emergency prayer circle." Her voice hitched, but she got it under control. "I'm headed up there, now." She glanced over at Jericho to confirm what she just said and he nodded at her. She realized he'd immediately turned around and headed toward the highway and was driving very fast. He'd also placed a red light on the dashboard. "Daisy, I'll let you know something when I know something."

✝✝✝

November 1st, Friday Morning

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Gabe grunted when his phone went off. He'd thought, because he'd been sick, that he'd be allowed to at least sleep in. He buried his head and ignored the call, hoping to get in fifteen more minutes of sleep.

Drawing a deep breath, he fell right back to sleep. Only a few seconds later, the phone went off again. Sighing, he intended to ask if he could take off half a day. He reached for his phone and squinted at the caller. It was his sister, Daisy, and suddenly he was alert and sat straight up. His mom must've gone into early labor.

"Hey," Gabe said. "Is Mom okay?"

"Yes. But Aunt Lisa is not. We need prayer and we need it fast."

"What happened?"

"She was on the way to the hospital in an ambulance to have the babies and a cement truck hit the ambulance."

Gabe jumped from the bed and pulled on some jeans. "Are they— are they alive?"

"I honestly don't know." Daisy's voice broke and she cried while telling all she knew. "Aunt Jodi is calling everyone at church and the family. I need you,

Gabe to get the prayer warriors going, and call Isla."

"I'm on it," Gabe said as he sat to put on his shoes. He ended the call and immediately went to his website, and hit the button for the prayer warriors, told what he knew and asked for prayers. Then he called Isla who was, as always, ready to help.

She asked him to Zoom in so she could capture the video of him explaining what had taken place, explain how much he loved and cared for his Aunt Lisa and how they were like his family, and how Uncle Chaz actually delivered him when he was born. She immediately made a breaking news story and put it up.

That done, Gabe grabbed a t-shirt and headed downstairs.

"You need to go right back to bed," Mrs. Kino stated firmly when she saw him coming down.

"We have a problem," he said immediately. "Aunt Lisa was on her way to the hospital in an ambulance to have the babies and the ambulance was hit by a cement truck. Daisy said that Rose said that Laynah said that the ambulance flipped several times."

Bree's eyes immediately filled with tears. "Oh no." She stopped what she was doing, dried her hands. "We need to start a prayer circle."

Young Eric stood. "I'll get Jordan and Taylor."

"Okay, and I'll get your dad."

"But Mom, he just went to bed."

"He would be very disappointed in me to know that I didn't include him because I thought he might be tired."

Young Eric nodded. "Okay, you're right."

Bree looked at Gabe. "You start praying right now, we'll be back in a minute in force."

"Yes, ma'am."

Gabe looked down at his phone as his website and social media notifications began to blow up. He remembered that Grandmaster Kino might be waiting for him and he needed to let him know what was going on. Just as he had that thought, his phone rang.

"Grandmaster Kino, I was just about to call you."

"Well, Jeffy just woke me up and said there is an emergency back home."

"Yes, sir." He went on to tell him what had taken place.

"I'll call everyone I know, and put out the word in my studios to include the Stewarts in their prayers."

"Thank you, sir."

"Gabe, Jeffy said that God is with them and they are gonna be alright."

Gabe felt immediate relief. "That's good to know, sir. Thank you. Oh, and sir, about training today..."

"Jeffy already told me that you were ill last night. Take the day off, tomorrow too. There are more important things than a tournament."

✝✝✝

Back in Pine Forest...

Rose hung up from speaking with Daisy and looked over at her driver.

"There's a little memorial site a few miles more on the right-hand side. It has like a cross and a brass sign and a bench. She said they're just past that."

Jericho nodded. "Call Jimmy."

"Hey, JJ, what's up? Find a place yet?"

"Code red, might need stabilization of crashed vehicle, an ambulance carrying one patient with two unborn children, also might need a spreader. Hwy 29, they were headed north toward Pine County Hospital."

"We're on the way."

Jericho looked over at Rose. She stared straight ahead and was speaking softly, mouthing words. He imagined she was praying.

"Rose, the guys are at the motel on Twenty-nine, so they won't be long at all," he informed her.

She nodded. "There!" she suddenly said, pointing at the small memorial.

A second later they came around a curve and saw a cement truck in the middle of the road and the Stewart car parked on the shoulder of the road. He swung over, pulled back into the street and backed down toward the overturned ambulance. He jumped from his truck and rushed down the embankment to assess the situation.

The vehicle was lying on its side, the driver's side up in the air. The driver's side was crushed. The driver was not currently in sight. The front windshield was gone and Jericho could see Chaz, standing inside, his feet on the passenger side door. He was trying to communicate with his wife through a tiny window. He could hear Mrs. Stewart speaking to her husband. The front of the vehicle was facing the embankment. The back facing the street.

Jericho circled quickly back around to where Charlie and Melaynah were trying to use a tire iron to pry open the back door to the ambulance. Jericho already knew that would be next to impossible. Matt stood nearby, his arm around his little sister, who was currently sobbing.

"Charlie, Laynah," he said firmly. "Move back so I can see."

In shock, they did as ordered.

Jericho looked over the situation. The back door was actually bent out at the bottom. He looked through the window of the ambulance. He could see the gurney on its side and Mrs. Stewart still strapped to it. She was moving, speaking to her husband. He could barely see the legs of the EMT, almost out of sight, which meant she was probably up against the back door. Her legs were not moving. He went around again, to the front of the vehicle, getting a better view from farther down the hill.

Shaking his head, he headed back to his truck. "Rose, get Laynah and her siblings away from the vehicle," he ordered as he went by.

Rose nodded and gave orders immediately and they gathered off to the side of the ambulance about twenty feet away.

He grabbed a tow strap from the bed of his truck, secured it and ran down the hill to the ambulance and secured it to the vehicle.

He then went back to his truck, got in and pulled slowly away and to the left to take the slack out of the strap to help keep the ambulance from shifting

until his team arrived. Once he felt the vehicle was secured as it could be for now, Jericho went back to speak with Chaz Stewart.

"Mr. Stewart. Is she coherent?"

"Honey, I'll be right back." Chaz backed out of the ambulance through the opening where the front windshield used to be and turned to face Jericho.

Jericho looked him over. He was in shock. John Appel had told Jericho that Chaz had once been a paramedic and that he quit due to PTSD. Jericho also realized that the cause of the PTSD was what happened to his first wife and daughter, and that happened just a few feet from this very spot. The man looked up at him with hope in his eyes, so Jericho did his best to make him feel that everything would be okay. One way would be to give him something to concentrate on.

"Is she coherent?" Jericho asked.

He nodded. "She seems to be, but she's in pain."

"Does she have any visible wounds?"

"There's a lot of blood on her face, so possible head wounds, but the pain seems to be because she's in labor."

Jericho nodded. "Okay. We're gonna get her out," he assured him. "She's gonna be fine. The other EMT inside, is she moving at all?"

Chaz shook his head. "No, but she *is* talking. She thinks her back is broken and she can't move. She may not have long."

Jericho nodded. "Rose, did they give you an ETA?"

Rose frowned. "The other Pine Forest Station was out on another call and they said it could be fifteen minutes."

Jericho didn't think they had fifteen minutes and at that point, Lisa screamed her husband's name, as if to prove him right.

"Chaz! They're coming!" She began to sob. "Dear Jesus, please help my babies. Chaz, the babies are coming. I can't get loose. I can't lift my leg to give them room."

Jericho nodded. He knew she was right and that the babies would be suffocated if they came into the world the way Lisa Stewart was wedged tightly between the gurney and ambulance structure. She needed enough room for delivery while minimizing unnecessary movement after a major rollover. She was strapped in, with a gurney at her back and the roof of the ambulance in front of her. "Charlie," Jericho said. "Take off your jacket. Matt, you too." The jackets were quilted vests, like the one he himself wore, and they would be perfect for the job he had in mind.

Jericho ran up to his truck and came back with an orange-colored device in his hand. He looked the group over. "I'm too big, Laynah, you're too tall. Who's stronger, Rose or Charlie?"

The two looked at each other. "I am," Charlie said.

Rose nodded.

Jericho put the device against the laminated glass of the window in the back door of the ambulance. "Listen to me. I'm gonna cut out this glass. Chaz, as soon as I do, you put your coat over the edge and boost Charlie up and through

the window."

Jericho handed Charlie a small cutting tool. "Put that in your pocket. As soon as you get in there, your mission is to either unbuckle or cut the straps that are holding your mom to the gurney and then pull the gurney away from her and roll her to her back. Can you do it?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you go in, be careful not to step on the other lady. She's right by the door."

Charlie nodded.

Jericho looked up as he saw the flashing blue lights of the police, but turned back to concentrate on what he was doing. He was grateful when Rose intercepted the officers and let them know that it was a First Responder Specialist Paramedic that was working the scene.

Thirty seconds later Chaz was placing his coat across the edge of the glass. He then turned and helped Charlie through the window just as Lisa screamed again, and then begged, "Please, Chaz, save the babies!"

A few seconds later Charlie was inside the ambulance.

"Charlie, the straps will be about where her chest is, then waist and then knees. Try to reach around her first and see if they will unlatch."

"I got that one," Charlie called out.

"Good son, get the one at her waist," Chaz said.

"I got it. And, the one at her legs isn't on her."

"Okay, now," Chaz said. "Can you pull the gurney away from her?"

He grunted and pulled it away and shoved it toward the front of the ambulance.

Jericho turned to Rose. "My guys will be here any minute. Go tell them to bring the spreader down here STAT."

Rose nodded and went up to the street. She got there just in time to see Sheriff Tyson drive up. He jumped out and asked Rose the situation. She quickly explained it.

At the ambulance Jericho spoke calmly to Charlie. "Okay, Charlie, you're doing a great job. Now is the most important part. We need to get the gurney away from her and give her room. Don't move her more than you have to."

Charlie nodded, but tears were streaming down his face.

Laynah had hold of Matt's and Aralyn's hands and all three were kneeling beside the ambulance, praying.

"Lisa," Chaz said through the small window. "We need you to turn onto your back very slowly. Charlie's gonna help you."

Lisa whimpered. "Okay."

"Charlie, listen to me now," Jericho said. "This is important. As soon as she rolls to her back you have to look and see if the baby is already out or coming out. Can you do that?"

Charlie nodded.

"Okay, on the count of three. One, two, three," Jericho said. "Roll her now."

Lisa groaned as she rolled onto her back and the hardest contraction she'd ever felt hit.

"Charlie, you have to look now. Move the sheet and pull your mom's clothing away from her. What do you see?"

"I, I, think I see the baby. It's coming out right now."

Jericho nodded. That's exactly what he thought would happen. "Chaz, here, hand him his jacket."

"Charlie," Jericho said. "Real fast now, hold your jacket under where the baby is coming out. Use both hands. Just let the baby come out on its own and when he's all the way out, catch him onto the jacket, keep a hand on him—he'll be slippery—then put him skin-to-skin on your mom's chest and cover them."

"It's coming," Charlie said.

Lisa was crying.

"Mom," Laynah called. "You're gonna be okay. Hold on, Mom. The other paramedic guys just got here. They're gonna get this door open."

"He's out," Charlie said. "It's the boy. He's out."

"Charlie, is he breathing?"

"I don't know. He's making sounds. Uh, yes, he's breathing."

"Okay, good. Lay him on your mom's chest, good. Use the jacket to cover him. Good. Now, Charlie, that sheet that you moved off your mom, can you reach it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now grab the sheet and place it on the floor there right between your mom's legs. Yes, just like that. Now look and see if you see the other baby coming."

"No, not yet."

"We're here, JJ."

Jericho looked up over his shoulder at his friend and co-worker and moved out of the way. "Get this door open. There's a victim just on the other side. We think still alive. Possible broken back. Charlie is inside with his mother, helping her to deliver twins."

Jimmy nodded. "Got it."

"Charlie. They're gonna use a hydraulic spreader to open this door. Don't let the sound scare you."

The baby already born began to cry and at the same time. "Shh, you're gonna be okay," he said and then looked down in horror to see the other baby coming. "Dad, the other baby is starting to come out!"

"Okay, listen, Charlie," Jericho said. "First, Mrs. Stewart, are you awake and alert? Can you hold him?"

"Yes. I can hold him," she said as she placed her hand on her child.

"Chaz, hand him the other jacket. Charlie, just like before, take this jacket and hold it under where the baby's coming out," Jericho yelled above the noise of the spreader.

Lisa whimpered as her body squeezed out the baby. Tears ran down her

face and she prayed again that God would save her babies.

"This one is so little," Charlie called out. "It's coming out. It's almost out."

The ambulance shifted a bit and the men paused their work on the door.

"Don't stop," Jericho shouted. "It isn't goin' anywhere."

"The baby's out," Charlie yelled just as the door came open.

Firefighter specialist Jimmy entered the ambulance immediately, grabbed the gurney in the back and found a backboard on the left wall which was currently the ceiling. Another specialist Max, knelt down beside the fallen EMT and bent his head down by her ear.

"Hey there, sweetie. We're gonna get you outta here. Can you tell me what your name is?"

She drew a few breaths before she spoke. "Sara," she whispered.

"Okay, Sara, are you in any pain?"

"No. Can't feel. Can't move," she said, as tears ran down her cheeks. "Lisa. How's Lisa?"

"Mrs. Stewart is doing fine."

"Her babies," Sara whispered.

"She has two fine, healthy babies," Max answered.

Sara sniffed. "How about Martin?" she asked, her voice breaking as she asked the question, showing that she already knew it was bad.

"We have some guys working on Martin," Max assured, though he knew Martin had not been found yet. He stood and moved out of the way a second so that Jericho could enter the small space.

Jericho immediately went to Charlie and lifted the smaller baby from him. She was moving, she was breathing. He looked her over and placed her next to her twin brother on Lisa's chest. "Charlie, you did a great job. I need to get where you are. Can you go back out through that window so that they don't have to move out of your way?"

"Yes, sir," Charlie said and quickly climbed out the window into the arms of his father, brother and sisters.

"Chaz?" Lisa called softly. Her voice weak.

"I'm here Red. I'm right here."

"I'm really tired."

"I bet. You rest now, baby."

She sniffed. "I'm afraid to fall asleep."

Chaz knew exactly why she felt that way. He drew a deep breath. It was time for his faith to kick in. "Don't be afraid my love. You'll either wake up in my arms, or in the arms of Jesus. Either way, it's a good deal, right?"

Lisa gave a weak laugh. "You are absolutely right, my cowboy."

"I love you, Red."

"If I don't make it, Chaz, if I don't make it, promise me you won't fall apart. Promise me you'll be strong for my babies."

"I'm not sure that I can promise you that, so I'm gonna need for you to be strong and come home and take care of these babies for me."

"I'll try," she whispered.

"You do that, and while we're waiting, me and the kids, we're gonna kneel down for a minute, okay?"

"Okay. I wish I could join you," she said so softly.

The family quietly knelt down and prayed together for their mother and their new siblings.

Lisa sniffed back some tears.

Jericho patted her arm. "Mrs. Stewart, since your family is praying, why don't you and I pray too. I'll pray while I work on you and you just close your eyes and listen, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered.

Jericho prayed aloud, and at the same time, tended to Lisa Stewart, monitoring her vitals and examining her head for injuries since there was blood all over her face. Meanwhile, Max and Jimmy got Sara stabilized, onto the backboard and onto the gurney.

Finally, Pine County paramedics pulled up. Sara was immediately loaded and taken to the hospital, while they brought a gurney for Lisa.

She opened her eyes as they lifted her. "Mrs. Stewart, you're gonna be okay," Jericho assured her. He hoped it was true because her blood pressure was low. Dangerously low. "And your babies are small, but doing well," Jericho nodded at the paramedics. "Start an IV. Pressure's low and watch for hemorrhage."

The paramedics, while on the phone with Lisa's doctor, started the IV and called out her vitals and did what the doctor ordered them to do.

While they did that, Jericho checked the babies again. Both were pink. Both breathing normally. This was a blessing. It was really a miracle.

"Don't we like, need to cut the cords?"

He looked up to see Laynah peeking through the window.

"No. It's better for the kids to leave them intact for now," Jericho answered.

He moved out of the way while Lisa, with her two babies lying on her chest, was strapped onto the gurney. They moved her out of the wrecked vehicle and her family crowded around her as Rose stood nearby, her arm around Melaynah.

Lisa opened her eyes and smiled at them.

Laynah moved forward. "Mom, you're gonna be okay," she promised.

Lisa nodded. "I know, sweetie. Thanks so much for being such a help. And I'm gonna need you to continue until I get home."

"I got this," Laynah said.

"Mommy," Aralyn cried.

Charlie lifted her up. "Here kiddo. Kiss mommy and they're gonna take her to the hospital and make her better."

Lisa smiled at her daughter. "Hey baby girl. I love you. Be good okay?"

"I will, I promise," she said in her sweet voice.

Chaz bent over and kissed his wife briefly on her lips. Then placed a soft kiss on the head of each baby. "A blessing on you, In Jesus' name," he whispered. "Lisa, we'll be right behind you."

Lisa gave a short laugh. "Wow, déjà vu."

No one else laughed.

She was loaded into another ambulance, and rushed to the Pine County Hospital where her doctor and the NICU doctor and nurses waited.

Jericho stood next to Chaz and his family. They watched as the sheriff made his way down the hill to speak to Chaz.

"Chaz," Tyson said solemnly. He looked around at his nieces and nephews. "Kids. You okay?"

"Yes, sir," they mumbled.

Chaz nodded at Jericho. "Jericho, this is Sheriff Tyson Stewart. He's my little brother."

Jericho extended his hand which Tyson shook immediately.

"Jericho, I heard about you and it's good to meet you and I can't thank you enough for what you did here today."

He shook his head and gave the usual answer. "Just doing my job and glad I was around to help."

Chaz nodded. "It was a miracle you were around to help and I am extremely grateful. My mind was scrambled and all I could think was, well..."

"Don't go there, Chaz," Ty said quickly.

Jericho looked Chaz over. "Let me have one of my guys drive you and your family to the hospital."

Chaz smiled. "That's a kind offer, but I'm okay to drive." He held out his hand. "See, not even shaking."

Jericho smiled and nodded.

A deputy approached. "Uh, Sheriff, we found the ambulance driver. He's deceased."

Jericho sighed. He glanced up to the road to see a few of his guys and a few of the dispatched paramedics working to get the driver of the cement truck out of his cab. He nodded toward the action. "Was he injured?"

Tyson shook his head. "They think it was a heart attack. As of right now, he's still alive."

Jericho sighed. "So out of a possible six victims, we lost one."

"Yeah, let's hope it stays that way," Ty mumbled.

Chaz nodded in agreement. "Okay, kiddos, let's load up."

Jericho stood alone and watched as the family got in the car and drove away, hoping this time for a better outcome. "Lord, just wanted to say thank You, for allowing me to help here today and thank You for the outcome. Father, if it be Your will, bless the Stewart family and let those babies and their mother be just fine. And Lord, bless Miss Sara with healing and the driver of the cement truck too. And bless Martin's family, Father, with peace and comfort. In Jesus' powerful name, Amen." The prayer was barely whispered and he finished it with a nod.

Two industrial tow trucks had arrived and were ambling for position and Jericho was asked to move his truck.

He nodded, unhitched the tow strap, gathered his tools and threw them in

the back of his truck. Up at the street, cops were ushering traffic around the right side of the cement truck. Even on a rural state highway like this one, traffic had backed up fairly quickly.

He moved his truck about fifty feet away, got out and came back to the site. He went straight to where his five guys were standing in a circle discussing what had taken place. "Hey, guys," he offered his hand to each one. "Just wanna say thanks for your assistance."

"It's what we do," Jimmy said.

Jericho nodded. "So, by any chance, have you seen a gorgeous blonde walking around here somewhere?"

"Sure did, why? You call dibs on her?"

"Since she rode here with me, uh, yeah." He scanned the area again, but didn't see her, then looked back at his friends who were also his employees. "There's a few more just like her if you guys are interested. But don't make a nuisance of yourselves. They are all Keegan Tanner's daughters, who is Gabe Tanner's father, and we all know that you don't mess around with that man." He looked around again, then up toward the highway.

"What happened, JJ? Did she ditch you?" Jalen quipped.

He sighed. "Maybe, but she doesn't seem like the type to do that, so I'm more worried than insulted. I mean, she wouldn't take off with someone without at least letting me know."

"How do you know she's not the type?"

"She runs the community center. She's very businesslike and responsible."

Jimmy laughed. "Sounds like a match made in heaven."

Jericho shook his head. "It's not like that. I just met her. She's interesting and easy on the eyes. That's it. Our next gig is in Nashville, so I'm thinkin' a relationship is out, but that didn't keep me from asking her on a coffee date."

"Ya know, bro, you ain't gettin' any younger. You gotta settle down eventually," Micah said.

"So do you," Jericho countered.

"So do we all," Max said quietly. "Which is why it's time to hire employees and expand the company. It's time, JJ," he said quietly.

Jericho sighed and nodded. "Maybe it is. We'll see. Right now though, I need to find Rose."

"Can't ya just call her?" Luke asked.

"I haven't gotten that far yet."

Jalen laughed. "You don't have her digits?"

"We've had coffee. That's it. And that was interrupted by this call." Jericho sighed. "So, will you guys please shut up, spread out and help me find her?"

"She was talking mighty cozy with that Sheriff."

"That Sheriff is old enough to be her father and is the brother of Mr. Stewart."

Jimmy laughed. "Small towns, everybody is related in some way."

Jericho frowned. "Spread out," he ordered before he walked away in search of Rose. He looked out near the street, around where the ambulance had

wrecked and finally went up to ask Sheriff Tyson.

"Jericho," Ty said as he approached. "Listen, I just wanna say thanks again for your help. My brother doesn't need another tragedy in his life."

"No need for thanks and I understand. John Appel told me Mr. Stewart's story. Um, Sheriff, so, have you seen Rose? I came here with her and she seems to have disappeared."

Ty nodded his head. "She got a call and excused herself and walked that direction, I suppose to hear better or for some privacy."

He pointed behind Jericho. "There's a memorial just around the curve. She's probably over there."

Jericho nodded. "Thank you, sir," he said as he hurried away.

He walked quickly around the curve and sure enough, there she was, pacing back and forth with the phone to her ear. Immediately, he sighed in relief, took out his phone and sent a text to his guys letting them know he'd found her.

He approached her and she looked up and then held up a finger.

"Yes, tomorrow and thanks so much for understanding. Okay, see you in the morning."

Rose smiled. "Hey, Jericho. Sorry you had to come looking for me. I got a call, and another and another and I sometimes walk when I talk and I ended up over here."

"No problem. I was just a little worried when I couldn't find you."

"Ahh, how sweet. You were worried about me."

He smiled. Her comment had been flirty, but her expression was one of weariness. "Rose, I have a feeling that the Stewarts are gonna be just fine."

She nodded. "I do too. I've been praying and I get a feeling of peace come over me. And then I stop praying and go immediately back to worrying. I bet God is getting sick of my lack of faith."

"I bet He's used to all of us humans being human."

She nodded. "Thanks for that."

He looked around at the polished wooden bench with a small brass plaque that read, "In Loving Memory of Cari and Julie Stewart." The bench had a couple of plant stands on either side with bouquets of silk flowers. "This looks like a brand new memorial, but I've actually heard about what happened and I know it was over twenty years ago."

Rose nodded. "Uncle Chaz almost never spoke about it. Not everybody knew about it. But suddenly, a few months ago, out of the blue, this memorial appeared. We don't know who put it up, but I know the Stewarts, Uncle Chaz and his parents and siblings come by every once in a while, to sit—to pray."

"Interesting. Any idea who did it?"

She smiled. "I have an idea, but I think they'd like to remain anonymous."

He nodded. "Gotcha. So, I'm guessing you missed your scheduled appointments today."

"Yes, but I've rescheduled for tomorrow. I'm gonna head up to the hospital later today. Right now, Aunt Jodi is going."

"That's John Appel's wife, right?"

"Yes. She's Aunt Lisa's best friend. She's also my mother's best friend. She's pretty much everybody's best friend. She's the coolest lady. She never gets tired of serving, I mean, of helping others."

"Well, it sounds like she and her husband are alike in that."

Rose nodded. "Her husband is my father's best friend. They served in the Marines together. Special forces. Very lethal guys and yet so full of love. They make me believe there are still good men out there."

Jericho nodded. "And you said earlier, that if you could have a marriage like your parents then you'd be happy."

She nodded. "And?"

"And you said that means you need to find a man like your father."

"Yep."

"That's a pretty hard reputation to live up to."

She shrugged. "Yeah, he may have ruined me for pretty much any man." She smiled. "Though you have a good start," she said with a laugh and then quickly changed the subject. "Ready to head back? I have a lot to do."

He nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She talked as they walked. "So, Jericho Jones, I just want to say thank you, for, well, for everything you and your guys did today."

"No big deal. It's what we do. There's no need for thanks."

"Yes, yes, that's what they all say, but there is a need. You took charge. You ordered people around. You didn't become emotional or flustered. You were everybody's rock. Even Uncle Chaz. He used to be a paramedic, but you helped him through this in such a gentle way."

"Well, when people you love are in danger, sometimes your mind shuts down. And I happened to know about Mr. Stewart's past, so I simply offered direction that he could focus on. He'd already lost a wife and child, at almost the same place on the road. His family was in danger of being torn apart."

"But they weren't, thanks to you."

"Thanks to God. What I did was just secure the scene and order people around. But those twins being born with no medical emergency, that is a miracle. Those babies were premature by seven weeks I was told. But they seemed healthy, normal, just small. And Mrs. Stewart having no more than a few small cuts on her head, that too is a miracle I can tell, just from the condition of the ambulance. God did that, and then he used me to just help out. I'm glad God led me here when this happened, that you were in my truck when Melaynah called you, that I was able to help."

"You did your job well. Your guys too. I think our firefighters are in good hands and are gonna learn a lot."

"I believe that too, and that's why I do what I do. So that every firefighter who wants to learn, has an opportunity to do so. And that will save more lives and help more people."

Rose's phone buzzed, she looked at the caller ID and smiled. "Hello there, sweetie," she said.

"Hey, Rose. So, what's the news?" Gabe asked.

"Sorry I didn't call you back, I've been busy. And I thought Daisy would call you. Aunt Lisa is alive and well. She gave birth while she was stuck in that overturned ambulance."

"And the babies are okay?"

"Yes."

"God is so awesome."

"Yes. And He had some helpers. Like Charlie crawled in through a small window and helped deliver the babies."

"Charlie! Wow, how cool is that!"

"Right? And then there was the man who is standing right next to me, Jericho Jones."

"Cool name. What did he do?"

"He's the one who got Charlie to crawl in there and deliver the babies. He's come to our town to help the firefighters. He's a nationally recognized Master Firefighter, Master EMT, and Special Ops firefighter and he has a company that goes around training paramedics and firefighters, and the moment the accident happened he turned his truck around and got there. If not for him, I don't think the babies would've survived."

"Then we can thank God for him too."

"Yep, and just as a side note, he's a twin just like I am and his brother is Joshua Jones."

"Hmm, Joshua Jones, like, the football player?"

"Yes, one and the same."

"Cool."

"And Jericho is highly impressed by you."

"By me?"

"Yes *you*, silly. He's been watching you and your adventures."

"Is that your brother?" Jericho asked.

"Yes, why, you wanna talk to him?"

"Sure. Just put it on speaker and let's get in the truck."

He opened her door and she climbed in. He got in and started the truck.

"So, am I on speaker?" Gabe asked.

"Yes. Hello, Gabe Tanner. It's nice to meet you."

"Hello, Jericho Jones, nice to meet you too. Rose tells me that you helped out with the Stewarts. So, thanks for that."

"Just doing my job," he said quietly.

Gabe laughed. "Yep, that was the correct response."

Jericho gave a soft laugh. "Just wanted to say, Gabe, that I was impressed by you and the faith you showed when you were abducted and since then, all the things that have happened. The guys and I, we follow you and you're a very special young man."

"Don't know about all that, but thanks. So, why is my sister in your truck? Are you dating my sister?"

"Gabriel Tanner, you stop it," Rose said quickly.

"It was just an innocent question," Gabe said with a chuckle.

Jericho smiled. “We’ve only had coffee, just earlier this morning before Laynah called, and then we hurried out to the accident. I don’t even have her digits yet, as my friends so brutally pointed out to me a few minutes ago.”

“Well, I hope you’re gonna remedy that quickly,” Gabe responded.

“Stop it,” Rose said firmly.

“I intend to,” Jericho said as if Rose hadn’t spoken.

“And be very nice to her, because she’s an awesome girl, and I’d hate to have to hunt you down and shoot the brother of Joshua Jones.”

“Gabriel Tanner, next time I see you I’ll shoot you myself,” Rose exclaimed loudly, making both Gabe and Jericho laugh. “Aren’t you supposed to be training or something?”

“Normally, yes, but I was sick last night and was given the...”

“Sick? With what? Do you have a fever? Has Jeffy seen you?”

“Yes, sick. With a little stomach bug. Not anymore and no, but yes.”

“What do you mean no, but yes?”

“Well, no, Jeffy didn’t see me, but she did a remote viewing kind of thing. So she didn’t see me in person, but yes, she DID see me. She said it was a little stomach virus and that I would be well by morning and I was. And so is Taylor and so is Mrs. Kino.”

“You all had it? Bless y’alls hearts.”

Gabe chuckled. “You sound like Mom. Anyway, Jeffy also told Grandmaster Kino this morning that Aunt Lisa and the babies were gonna be okay. So tell them that. It should help them.”

“I love that,” Rose said softly. “I will tell them.”

“I love it too. Jeffy is very cool. And she says that she is very in tune with me for some reason. But maybe it’s because she’s so connected to her dad and like, so am I.”

“Yeah, maybe. So, tell us, Gabe. What do you have planned for the rest of the day?”

“Um, well, I have to escort Taylor tonight onto the football field because it’s homecoming and she’s part of the homecoming court.”

“Awesome! But, Gabe, you know you have to wear a suit, right?”

“Yes, Rose, I’m not an idiot. Besides, Taylor has already made sure I have the right clothes and also that we don’t clash. She hates when people clash.”

Rose giggled. “What color is she wearing?”

“She is wearing midnight blue.”

“So, like a navy blue?”

“Oh no, that’s what I said, but she insisted it’s midnight blue and it’s different than navy blue.”

Rose laughed. “That Taylor is a trip. I like her so much.”

“Me too.”

“How much do you like her Gabe?”

“Now *you* stop.”

“Oh come on, do you think one day you guys will get married?”

He was silent a moment. “I hope so. I know we’re young, and like, she’s

still in high school, but if we make it past all that, there's a strong possibility that she'll be your sister-in-law. Whaddya think about that?"

"I think whatever makes you happy makes me happy."

"Cool, sis, but I'm sure Jericho didn't get on the phone to hear some sappy love story."

Jericho laughed. "Nothin' sappy about love. Still, so, you ready for the big Mini-MART?"

"Yep. Feel good. Feel strong. Ready to kick some butt."

"We'll be watching and rootin' for ya, big guy."

"Thanks. I think Joe's is doin' a big thing. And also the Wings Place, and Ally's Steakhouse and the Inn and of course, my family."

"I'll keep that in mind," Jericho said dryly as Rose smiled.

"Okay, well, I'm hanging up because I have to tell people over here in Cali what's happening with the Stewarts. Bye, Rosey, and Jericho, can't wait to meet you in person when I get back there in a few weeks. Or, like, will you still be there when I get there?"

"Yes. I'm here until after the first of the year."

"Cool, then TTYL." He ended the call.

Rose smiled as Jericho pulled up in front of the community center and turned off the engine. "That boy, he just makes me laugh. I miss him so much."

Jericho nodded. "He's a light. A real light to this world. That's why the people of the world either love him or try to get rid of him. Do you listen to his daily videos?"

Rose shook her head. "Not always. I've been so busy. To be honest, lately, I've only seen about two in as many weeks."

"The videos aren't long. He only talks for a few minutes, but the power he has is evident, even in that short time. And what's cool is, he speaks about normal stuff, like what he's gonna do that day, but he's humble about it, and he's funny, entertaining, and then it never fails, somewhere in what he's saying, ya think, oh... yeah... I should be more like that, or do something like that. He inspires people to be better people without even knowing he's doing it. And he's ultra popular. Yeah, part of that is his good looks and bright personality, but people crave his light. He brings them closer to God. A lot of them probably don't even know that's what he's doing.

"So, when he goes live, immediately, there are thousands of people watching. One time I was one of the first to click on when he went live and there were only a few hundred on, and I was fascinated watching it jump to two thousand, and then suddenly eight thousand, then twenty thousand. It was crazy cool to see so many people across the nation tune in."

Rose smiled. "Cool. So, what was the most recent one you watched?"

"Yesterday. I pretty much watch him every day."

"I haven't seen it. So, what did he talk about yesterday?"

"He'd just gotten to the studio to train and he was running late because he saw this dog running along the highway dragging his leash and he thought the dog had gotten away from its owner and was gonna get hit by a car, so, he

pulled over and for some reason the dog stopped running and just looked at him. He said he knelt down and the dog came right to him and he was able to grab the leash. He was looking at the dog tags for a phone number, but a man came running down the street and claimed the dog. Gabe told him his name and the guy said he knew about Gabe. He then thanked Gabe profusely and said his dog would usually never run up to a stranger and that Gabe must have a piece of meat in his pocket."

Rose laughed. "Okay, that's interesting, and funny, but what's so inspiring about that? Is it because he stopped to help?"

"Well, that is cool, but that's not the inspiring part. He said, when he was looking at the dog tags, the thought came to him, about how we all belong to God, and our dog tags get placed around our necks every time we pray, because it connects us to Him. And then he said, some of us wear crosses to acknowledge our belief in Jesus, and those are kind of like our dog tags too. But then, he said that God really knows those of us who are His, no tag required. And then he flashed that smile and shrugged and said, 'I guess my mind is all over the place this morning. I'm late so y'all have a good day.' And that was it. He signed off, and probably had no idea that the things he said are so inspirational. And you should've seen the comment section blow up."

"So," Rose thought and then counted on her fingers. "Let's see. One, he stopped to help, so that's showing how to be in service to others. Two, the dog came to him with no fear, so maybe the dog recognized God's light in Gabe. Just a thought. Three, the guy heard of Gabe, and so Gabe stopping to help shows he's the real deal. You know, like, he's not just talk. He actually practices what he preaches. He then does a little preaching about us all belonging to God and that God knows each of us personally, and then he ends the whole thing with how his mind is all over the place, which shows humility." She nodded. "Yeah, he's a great kid."

"You should go back and watch his videos, I mean, the ones you haven't seen. You can access all of them through his website. Which, by the way, is state-of-the-art and well run."

Rose nodded. "I will do that. I feel bad that a perfect stranger has to tell me to watch my own brother's videos."

"Well, I'm not a perfect stranger anymore. And, people get busy, so no big deal." He smiled at her. "And now I'd like to remedy a situation, as Gabe put it, and get your number."

"Hand me your phone," she said.

He unlocked it and handed it to her and she punched in the numbers and called herself. She grinned up at him. "So now you know I didn't ghost you by giving you the wrong number."

His brows shot up. "It never occurred to me that you would do that, so now you've got me on edge."

She giggled. "Just where I want you."

He smiled. "Well, I'll be calling you soon, Rose Rose."

She rolled her eyes at the pet name he'd already given her. "I'm on pins and

needles."

"Really?"

She laughed. "What do you think?"

She turned and walked away and he watched her all the way into the building before he started his truck and pulled away.

✞✞✞

Proverbs 24:16

"...for though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again,
but the wicked stumble when calamity strikes."

Chapter Fifteen

November 1st, Friday Evening
Brookside High School Football Stadium

Young Eric walked slowly beside Jordan. They were bringing up the rear of a large entourage. That entourage was making quite a stir, even though they'd arrived extra early to keep that from happening. The entire family was surrounded by AMT agents making the large group even larger. The group included Ricky and Bree, Gabe and Taylor, Jeffy and Cam, Jensen and Kimmie, Jason and Angel, Justin and Lori, Eric and Shelley, with Angelina, Nate, Noah, Abe, and Manny. Melody and Logan. Bella with Em. Joey and Breez, with Sophia, Kelstyn, and Ledger. Young Eric and Jordan and finally, Jamie and Josie.

The only ones who weren't there were JoJo, who had a game in North Dakota the next day and his father Mark, and Jeff and his two boys who went along to support JoJo. Jeff's wife, Mickey, opted to stay home and relax since she was in her last trimester and feeling tired and Jewell Perez, soon-to-be Brooks, following the Kinos' lead to be in service, decided to go to the Davis home and take care of Mickey. When she'd learned that Mickey was pregnant at the age of 42 and her family was out of town, Jewell decided to visit, cook her dinner and get to know her better.

Logan would have usually been at JoJo's game, but had to stay home because he had a gig tomorrow at a coffeehouse. Tonight, he decided to get to know Melody a little better.

Young Eric walked beside Jordan as she ambled along on her crutches. She'd donned a baseball cap and sunglasses to try to cover the scabs and scratches and bruises that were on her face, not because she was ashamed of them but because she didn't want to draw attention to herself. News of the attack on Eric Kino's girlfriend had hit the news the very next day and she truly hated being in the news.

She suddenly stopped a moment and looked around.

"What's wrong, babe?" young Eric asked.

Her eyes moved up to his face. "Did you, did you hear that?"

"What did you hear?"

"Someone said, 'die Jordan.'" Her face crumpled. "You didn't hear it?"

He shook his head. "Okay, Jordan, don't get upset. Let's go find our seats and we'll talk about it."

She nodded and started walking again. "Do you think I'm losing my mind?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. But you are traumatized and it may take

a little while before the trauma heals."

"So, I must be very weak. Because you were kidnapped and beat up and almost buried alive, and you seem like you're just fine."

"If you recall, I wasn't fine at first. It takes a little time. Give yourself a few more days. Be kind to yourself. We've also had a different upbringing. Yours was full of hardships and sadness and struggles. Mine was not. So, you, Two-Three, are much stronger than me."

She smiled, but shook her head. "You're good for my ego anyway. What would I ever do without you?"

"You would do horrible without me. You remember that."

She giggled.

Climbing the stadium steps was difficult and young Eric was tempted to just lift her and carry her up, but she asked him to not make a spectacle and just stay right behind her in case she needed help.

Finally they took their seats and immediately young Eric went down to speak with his grandfather about what Jordan thought she heard. After speaking together for a few minutes, both men came up to Jordan. Young Eric sat beside her and Grandmaster Kino knelt down in front of her, and asked her to take her glasses off. Once she did, he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Jordan," he said softly. "When you heard those words, 'die Jordan,' were they audible or did you hear them inside your head?"

She thought a moment. "Well, at first, I thought I heard it. I looked around to see who would have said such a thing. But now that I think about it, maybe it was inside my head. Grandmaster Kino, do you think I'm losing my mind?"

He smiled and took her hand. "No, sweetheart. I don't want to frighten you, but there are dark forces in this world. They are just as real as God and Jesus. And they never stop. They never rest. They zero in on the brightest lights and try to stop them. The demon that was either in that young man or attached to him, or hanging on to him, or just working through him, it saw you, saw your light, and knew immediately that it had to end you. We won't let that happen. The fight we fight though, is a spiritual battle. So that means putting on the full armor of God every single day. As you grow stronger spiritually, you'll be able to do that easily. For now..." He stopped speaking a moment and took her hands in his. "I rebuke that darkness in the name of Jesus Christ."

Jordan jolted as if she'd heard a bass drum pound right next to her.

"Father, we ask for Your protection for your daughter Jordan. Fill her with Your light, protect her, Father, send Your angels to watch over her and keep her. In Jesus' powerful name, Amen."

"Amen," young Eric whispered.

Jordan looked up at the man with tears in her eyes. "Thank you, Grandmaster Kino. I think I actually feel better already. Like, lighter."

He smiled.

"You are a powerful man. When you spoke, I mean, when you rebuked the darkness, it was so loud, it like, reverberated through me."

"That's not my power, Jordan. That's God's power. In His name, we have

power over the darkness. Have faith and command it to be, and it will be."

"I'll work on developing that faith."

"I believe you." He rose, bent and kissed the top of her head. "And I think we'll have Jeffy take a closer look at you inside and out."

Young Eric rose and shook his hand. "Thanks, Granddad."

He smiled at his grandson. "You work on your faith too. Because you too have the power to help her."

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, sir. I started to do it myself, and then I thought, maybe I'd better get Dad, but then I thought, Jordan's been talking to you in counseling sessions and she might be more comfortable with you, and then I thought, she'd actually be more comfortable with me, but am I strong enough and so..."

Eric senior smiled. "Truly you have a dizzying intellect," he quoted from his wife's favorite movie of all time. "Get strong. No doubts. Why do you think the dark forces are gathering against Jordan? They don't want you two together. They don't want you to join forces, work for God and spread your light, and they do not want you to join together and bring even more of God's warriors into this world. But, young Eric, we can't let them stop us. God is having us gear up for a huge battle and it might be coming sooner than we think, and that battle is a spiritual one and we need all the warriors of light that we can get into this realm."

Young Eric frowned. "What are you saying?"

He smiled. "You know exactly what I'm saying."

Young Eric nodded. "Okay. I hear you."

"Well, don't take my word for it. Pray. Listen. God will tell you what He wants you to do."

"Yes, sir, I will."

Grandmaster Kino went back to his seat and immediately Nate and Angelina asked if they could go sit with young Eric and Jordan and permission was granted.

A few minutes later a group of girls from Taylor's volleyball team came up to see if Taylor and Gabe could come sit with them for the first part of the game until they had to go down and get ready to walk on the field during halftime. They also were given permission though Agents Wyatt and Brown had to stay with them at all times.

The two kids and their bodyguards headed down to the forty-yard line student section causing a huge stir. Young Eric watched as other high school guys in suits, who obviously also would be escorts, shook hands with Gabe. Whatever Gabe said had them laughing. Taylor smiled up at him with stars in her eyes. His sister was madly in love.

They watched the teams warm up on the field for a while, and then young Eric turned to Jordan. "Can I get you anything? I mean, something from the concession stand?"

She grinned. "What are you gonna get?"

"I was thinking of some popcorn maybe." When she frowned, he smiled.

"And also, maybe something chocolate."

She smiled. "Something chocolate sounds good."

He laughed. "You got it. Be right back."

She nodded. He stopped to ask others if they'd like anything and it began to be a contest to see if he could remember everything. Out of mercy, Logan rose and went with him and as the cousin/brothers stood in line, they caught up on news.

"So, Logan, made any headway with Melody?"

He grinned but shook his head. "I haven't had much time to do much of anything. I asked her if she'd like to come see me play at the coffeehouse tomorrow night though, and she said 'yes,' so, let's just see how that goes."

"Cool. Jordan and I will keep her company while you play. How interested are you in her?"

Logan shrugged. "She's good lookin'. She's really good with the kids. She's got such a sweet demeanor. I like her so far. She seems a little afraid of me, which I don't understand."

"Maybe she has the idea about people like us, like Jordan did. She didn't trust me. She thought I wasn't real, like, I was just doing her a favor by asking her out, or just playing around with a nobody. Her words, not mine."

"She thought that?"

"Briefly. But after her initial hesitation, we got to know each other pretty fast, and she dropped her guard."

Logan nodded. "So, how serious is it between you two?"

Eric smiled. "It's very serious."

"So, you think she's the one?"

"I do," he said quietly.

"Bro, are you tellin' me that you two are gonna get married?"

He shrugged. "I hope so. I know we're young. Especially her. And right now she's not stable so I don't want to mess with her emotions."

Logan nodded. "All I know is, when I ran into her at the coffeehouse, all she could think about was you."

He smiled. "She told me that you had my back."

"Oh, absolutely. I was thinkin' I was gonna have to mess that dude up. But he backed away pretty fast."

"Yeah, well, when she goes back to school on Monday, I'm gonna tell Agent Wyatt to be on the lookout for him. He's a little pushy and I don't want Jordan to have to deal with a pushy guy right now."

"Other than you," Logan laughed.

"I am not pushy," Eric said with a smile.

"Whatever you say, bro."

Back up in the stands, with their arms full of goodies, young Eric and Logan doled out the treats.

Just as Eric handed Jordan a Milky Way bar and sat down next to her, he could see a group of people headed up toward their area. A couple of agents stepped in front of them and spoke to the group, and then one agent turned and

came to speak with Ricky and Bree.

"Excuse me, Mr. Kino, Mrs. Kino, but those people wanted me to ask if you would consider signing their programs for them."

Ricky looked at Bree and she nodded.

"Two at a time, and once we're asked to stand for the National Anthem, we're done for the night," Ricky said firmly. He and Bree both stood.

"Yes, sir," the agent said and hurried down to convey the news to the other agent and the group of autograph seekers.

A line formed and the first two approached.

"Thank you so much, Master Kino," a young woman said. "You've been my hero since I was a kid. Thanks for being such a good role model for my son. I'm a single mom and you really help."

Ricky smiled kindly. "Glad I can help. Is your son with you?"

"He's on the field. He's a lineman for Brookside."

"Awesome," he said as he signed the program. "Another good role model for him would be Gabe Tanner. He should follow him."

She laughed. "Oh, he does." She turned from him to Bree. "Ms. Adams, I am also a big fan of yours."

Bree smiled. "Thank you," she said as she quickly signed the program.

And so it continued. When a few of the crowd realized that Joey Adams was also in their group, they began to ask him for autographs too.

"It never ends, does it," Jordan asked.

Young Eric shook his head. "That's what I'm talking about. It's constant and that's why I've always kept a low profile. Well, I mean, at least after I was bashed in the head when I was twelve."

"That's the skateboard event you told me about?"

He nodded.

"So, when you and I met, I was wary of you being some rich celeb who just wanted to use me, and you were wary of me liking you just because your family is famous."

"All I can say is, I'm sure glad we got past that, because now, you being in my life makes me happy. When I wake up in the morning, the first thing I think about is, I have Jordan in my life, and I smile."

She smiled as she licked some chocolate off her lips. "I'm glad I can make you smile."

They kissed quickly and turned to watch the autograph seekers as they approached his mom and dad.

When the Kinos signed autographs they were always careful to see if God was placing someone in their path that needed help. So they always chatted briefly, they always discerned the energy of those who approached them. Everything went smoothly until a lone woman approached. Ricky looked her over. She was large, broad shoulders. Bulging biceps. She wore heavy makeup. One side of her head was shaved, the other side was long, and the long hair was streaked with purple dye. The outlandish appearance didn't bother them. To each his, or in this case, her, own. But Ricky got an immediate vibe of

hostility and he moved forward, slightly in front of Bree. She noticed it and stepped back, trusting her husband's instinct.

Ricky turned slightly and glanced at one of the agents nearby and gave a signal by touching his nose, which meant that he senses danger. He smiled at the woman, but she had no program in her hand to be signed.

She gave a slight smile and nodded. "I don't want your autograph. I would just like to ask you a couple of questions."

He nodded. "Just a second," he said firmly and turned to look at his son. He pointed to his eye.

Young Eric nodded and immediately pulled out his phone.

"What's goin' on?" Jordan asked.

"Dad wants me to video this exchange. I'm gonna move over there for a better view. You video from here."

She pulled out her phone and started videoing. She looked around and saw that Logan too was videoing, and Jason and Joey were on their feet, as were all the other agents.

Shelley turned and placed herself in front of the children, gathering them close to her. Grandmaster Kino then placed himself in front of her.

"Okay," Ricky finally said. "What are your questions?"

"So, do you ever intend to fight in another challenge? Or any other tournament?"

Ricky shook his head. "Nope. My tournament days are over."

"What about an exhibition type tournament?"

"It would have to be for a really good cause."

"Why do you not want to fight in the challenge anymore?"

He shrugged. "I'm getting older. I'm fifty-two. Fighting in the Challenge is hard on the body."

"Well maybe you could add a division to the challenge and fight women."

"We already have a women's division in the Challenge."

"No, I mean *you* fight a woman. It wouldn't be so hard on you to do that, would it?"

"It wouldn't be hard on me to do that *at all*, but I don't fight women."

"Well, it wouldn't be just any woman."

"It doesn't matter how special the woman is, I don't fight women."

"You look like you're in great shape still. You don't look your age. How can you say that it's too hard on you to fight?"

"It's too hard on my body to train and fight in a *tournament*. It's not too hard on me to fight."

"Then fight me."

He gave a soft laugh. "As I said, I don't fight against women."

"Why not? I've trained almost my whole life in several different styles. I'm strong. I'm fast. I'm mean. I can take you on. Besides, you're assuming my gender and that's very offensive."

Ricky shrugged. "I call it like I see it. And didn't you just call yourself a woman, by asking me to fight a woman and then offering to be that woman?"

The woman looked like her head would explode, but got control and calmed herself. “Well, let me just say, you’ve never fought a person like me. I’m very good. Are you afraid?”

Ricky sighed. “It doesn’t matter if you’re very good. It wouldn’t matter if you were a Grandmaster five times over, I would beat you,” he paused for emphasis, “to—a—pulp.”

“You think you’re that good?” she asked, her face turning bright red.

“It’s not about how good I am. It’s about the fact that I’m biologically a man and you are biologically a woman.”

“Stop saying that.”

“I call it like I see it.”

She drew a deep breath. “Fight me, Ricky Kino. If you insist on calling me a woman, then I have to point out that you have a wife and a daughter and I find it unbelievable that you would discriminate against women.”

Ricky sighed, realizing she didn’t see her own inconsistencies. “First, ma’am, you called *yourself* a woman at the beginning of this conversation. Second, this has nothing to do with discrimination and everything to do with the difference between men and women. We are not equal. Not physically and not even temperamentally but that’s another subject. In this case, physically, on average, after puberty, men are stronger and men are faster. It’s not discrimination, it’s science and it’s the way God created us.”

“Give me a break.”

Ricky shrugged. “Males and females are different. Look in the animal kingdom. A male lion has that big mane, the female does not. Their DNA makes them that way. They were made differently. Neither the male lion nor the female is less. They each have a role to play. But they are different. Look at birds, let’s say, a cardinal. The male is bright red, the female is more muted. It’s in their DNA. In the human world, it’s the opposite. The female is the one who is bright and beautiful. The human male, on average, is bigger and stronger and faster. The male is supposed to protect the female. Provide for her. It’s not about domination or discrimination. We should provide our females with all the opportunities to achieve whatever they want, but we keep them safe. We don’t hurt them and we certainly don’t fight them. And, like I said, it’s purely science. It’s in our chromosomes, our DNA, our hormones. We are different. Equally important, we need each other, but we are different.”

“Okay, even if I accepted that, which I don’t, but even if I did, my skills make me equal.”

Ricky rolled his eyes. “Your skills may help you against an untrained attacker, and that would be good. But your skills don’t make you equal and they would do nothing to help you against me.”

“Prove it.”

He shook his head. “I am not gonna fight you. You are just gonna have to take my word for it. I'm bigger than you, stronger than you, and far more experienced than you.”

She nodded as if she’d come to agree with him, and then swung at him. He

blocked it quickly and easily. She swung again, he blocked again. She swung three more times and he blocked her three more times, the last time keeping hold of her wrist. So she swung with her free hand and he held that wrist too. She struggled to get herself free but he held her fast. "Do you get the picture yet?" he asked calmly.

"Let me go," she said fiercely.

"I believe your little question and answer session is over."

"Let me go," she yelled loudly, getting the attention of other people in the stands, trying to make it look like Ricky was the one doing something wrong.

Ricky sighed. Jason gave a slight nod and two of his agents moved in to escort the woman away. Ricky let go of her arms, but suddenly Shelley jumped up and stood in front of the woman.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," she yelled. "Coming up here and starting your crap with our family all sitting right here, and scaring my young children. You wanna fight? *I'll* kick your butt. You might be a big strong bully, but I've been trained by the best and I was just watching you and you did so many things wrong I couldn't begin to explain it to you. Now you get yourself outta here, march yourself right down those steps right now or I will have you arrested. Shame on you. Shame on you!"

Jordan's mouth opened in surprise as did Melody's and a few of the agents. Everyone else only smiled. They knew Shelley well.

Grandmaster Kino placed a calming hand on Shelley's shoulder. "Down girl," he said quietly.

The woman was escorted away. The Kinos signed a few more autographs. The teams left the field. The announcer started speaking and they were asked to rise for the National Anthem, and that was the end of that.

They settled in to watch the game. Traditionally, the team chosen for the homecoming game is usually one they expected to beat to ensure a homecoming victory. Unfortunately, that makes the game boring. The score at the half was 38-3. Ricky watched Lance, the QB who'd forced a kiss on Taylor. He was a decent quarterback and Ricky wished him nothing but good.

Bree looked down at her phone as the field cleared and the announcer talked about it being homecoming. She half listened as he announced that they were about to introduce the homecoming court and don't forget about the homecoming parade early the next morning and about the homecoming dance tomorrow night. Bree looked back up with a smile. "Guess who's here and live-streaming," she said.

"Um, Isla August?" Jeffy answered.

"How'd ya guess," Bree laughed.

Jordan and young Eric looked for her down on the field and pointed at her. The school band finally got situated and began to play, Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely." The announcer began with the freshman court, introducing both the young ladies and who they were being escorted by. Some of the girls had their fathers escort them, most had their boyfriends, and some of those boyfriends were in their football gear instead of suits because they were

playing tonight.

The music switched to a different song for each class. The sophomores got "Make You Feel My Love" by Adele. The juniors got "Here Comes the Sun" by the Beatles, and the seniors got, "Pretty Woman."

The Kinos all had their phones out. The roar from the crowd when Taylor's name was announced was deafening. Young Eric wondered about it, because Taylor had told him she wasn't that popular in school. She'd said she pretty much kept to herself, and he understood that completely. Then, when they announced who was escorting her, the decibels jumped significantly, making the Kinos laugh. Gabe Tanner was definitely a popular guy.

Both Taylor and Gabe flashed brilliant smiles at the warm reception. Jordan smiled too. All the girls in their sparkly evening gowns looked so beautiful. Jordan herself had never been to prom or to a formal dance. Even if she'd been asked, she wouldn't have accepted because she wouldn't have been able to afford the dress.

"Whatcha thinkin' about?" young Eric asked her.

She smiled up at him and told him what she'd been thinking.

"Well, Jordan, we have to remedy that," he replied. "When you get all healed up, let's go buy you a dress and go out for a formal evening."

She shook her head. "You don't have to do that for me. I really don't care about stuff like that."

"I believe you. But if I do it, it would be more for me. I'd love to see you all dolled up and standing next to me. What a treat that would be."

"Whatever, Three."

He smiled at her.

"Taylor looks absolutely amazing," she said softly. "Your sister is unbelievably beautiful."

Young Eric nodded. "I agree. And the cool part is, she's beautiful on the inside too."

"I agree." She sighed. "She and Gabe make such a perfect couple."

"They do. And so do you and I."

He lowered his head and kissed her softly. When he pulled away he looked deeply into her eyes. "I love you, Jordan. I love you so much I think my heart might explode."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I love you too. So much. But..." She stopped and looked away.

"But? But what?"

She smiled and shook her head. "But nothing."

He looked closely at her, trying to figure out what she could be thinking, but got distracted as they began to announce the winners of the homecoming court in each class. When it got to the seniors, everyone held their breath to see who would be announced as the homecoming queen. It was Taylor.

Jordan watched Taylor being congratulated as they all left the field and was happy that she'd won, though Taylor herself didn't appear too happy about it. That was odd and Jordan intended to ask her about it later. Her fellow students

however, seemed to be genuinely excited and happy that Taylor Kino would be their homecoming queen. The boy chosen as king though, was Lance White, the QB. If they'd been able to vote for someone who didn't go to their school, Gabe Tanner would've won for sure. Jordan frowned. Lance was the guy who'd forced himself on Taylor. He'd apologized, but still, Jordan didn't like it. Apparently neither did Three.

Taylor and Gabe went back to the student section for the second half of the game. Gabe took off his suit jacket and placed it around Taylor's shoulders as the air was getting cooler in the evenings. A few minutes later two police officers approached the Kino family.

Everyone looked up, Jason and Justin stood as if they'd been expecting it.

"Mr. Kino," one of the officers said, directing his words to Ricky. "Would you mind stepping out here so we can have a word with you?"

Ricky sighed and motioned at Justin who stepped forward with him.

One of the officers put his hand out to stop Justin. "Excuse me sir, but we only want to talk to Mr. Kino. You'll have to step back."

Justin rolled his eyes. "I'm his attorney, and he's not speaking to you without me present."

The officer looked a little dismayed but had no choice but to allow it.

Ricky nodded. "I'm happy to speak with you with my attorney present, which he is." He stood on the stairs and looked at the officer expectantly.

"Uh, Mr. Kino, it's come to our attention that a little earlier tonight you punched a woman who'd come to ask for your autograph."

Shelley gasped and jumped to her feet.

Eric senior smiled and tugged on his wife's hand. "You know we got this, Shelley girl. Stay calm."

"Well, that's a flat out lie. How can people be so evil?" she asked.

"Anything to try to take out a warrior of God, which Ricky is. Stay calm."

Justin nodded at Ricky.

"I'm afraid you have the facts a little backward," Ricky said calmly. "She stated the moment she came up here that she didn't want my autograph. She tried to challenge me to a fight and I turned her down. Several times."

"Mr. Kino, she has the marks on her arms to prove it."

"And I have video."

"That can be presented at court," the officer stated.

Ricky's eyebrows rose. "What, so, you've already decided that you're going to arrest me?"

Jason immediately got on his phone.

Justin stepped forward. "Before you make any decision about probable cause, I strongly suggest you review the video evidence we have. It records the entire encounter from multiple angles and you will be able to see that Grandmaster Kino did nothing wrong. The woman threw punches at him and he blocked them. If you arrest him after refusing readily available evidence that directly contradicts the allegation, we'll address that appropriately." Justin stopped just long enough to let that settle. Then went on. "Grandmaster Kino

is at a public high school football game watching his daughter, who was just named homecoming queen. If you humiliate him or his daughter by making a false arrest, he will take it all the way. I realize this is not the place to argue, still, the video is right here and it shows the truth. That woman is trying to be vindictive in telling you a lie."

"I think we should see the video," the other officer said quietly.

"Fine, let me see the video," the first officer said.

Young Eric pulled the video up on his phone and handed it to the officer who studied the video carefully. As the officer watched the video Jason ended his call with a smile.

After watching the video, the officer looked up and sighed. "Well, we've obviously been lied to."

A minute later the other officer got a call. He answered and walked away. When he came back his face was pale and he nodded at his partner. "Come on, Statton. Not only have we obviously been lied to, now, we have to go speak again with Miss Cantrell, about making false accusations to the police and about obstruction of justice."

Ricky smiled. "Have a nice evening, officers," he said as he went back to his seat.

Young Eric retrieved his phone and went back to sit with Jordan.

"So, I guess it was a lucky thing you guys decided to video that conversation," Jordan said.

"Well, it wasn't luck. There have been many times when we wished we'd made video. So, for the past several years, if any of us had a bad feeling about something, we tap our eye and that lets the rest of us know that we should record whatever is goin' down."

"You guys are just so smart."

He laughed. "Once bitten, twice shy."

"I've heard that expression a million times but never really understood it."

"It means, if something bad happens you don't want to repeat it. Like the proverb, 'fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.' We try hard not to be fooled twice. You know how Granddad is always saying the dark forces are trying to put out our light? Well, it's true and we have to stay awake and aware."

"Doesn't it make you wish that you were just a nobody, like, poor, simple, no power. Then maybe the dark forces would leave you alone."

Young Eric's brow furrowed. "Uh, no. What good would that do? First, we don't cower. And ya know, there are scriptures about that, about hiding your light under a bushel instead of letting it shine, or about not doing anything with what God has given you. We have to be strong and keep fighting the fight. No matter how difficult or tiresome it seems to be."

Jordan nodded. "I get that. That fierceness in your eyes as you said that, that hero mode, that's what attracted me to you. I've never met a guy who truly and consciously tries every single day to do something good and right."

He shrugged. "To those who have been given much, much is expected. I

have a strong desire to do God's will."

"I'm beginning to truly understand that."

✝✝✝

November 1st, 11:00 PM, Friday Night

Pine County Hospital, Just outside of Pine Forest, Georgia

Chaz Stewart startled briefly when his phone buzzed. He'd been sitting in the small chapel at the hospital, thinking, praying, being grateful and apparently, dozing. He leaned over so he could pull the phone from his pocket and answered it.

"Hey, Red, you okay?"

She sighed before she spoke. "Yes, I'm okay. Honey, so, are you still here in the hospital?"

"Yes, of course. I'm not goin' anywhere."

"Can you come back to my room?"

He stood and headed out of the chapel. "I'm on my way. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Just a little, uh, I don't know. Maybe a mild panic attack."

He hit the up button on the wall next to the elevators. "Well, that's understandable."

"Where did you go?"

He stepped onto the elevator and hit the '2.' "I went to the NICU to see the babies and then went to the chapel to pray for a bit."

"You've been gone a long time."

"I have a lot to be grateful for."

She sniffed. "Are the babies okay?"

He stepped off the elevator and turned left. "They were both sound asleep."

"Did you make sure the nurses knew that I'm pumping and that I want to be present at every feeding?"

"I spoke to them briefly about that. One of the nurses said the babies are doing so well she was surprised to find that they were only thirty-three weeks. She said 'they're doing remarkably well for thirty-three-weekers. They're breathing on their own, their color and tone are good, and they're already showing a strong suck reflex.' I know they seemed tiny to us, but she said their weight is actually very robust at 4 lbs. 14 oz. and 4 lbs. 1 oz."

Lisa looked up at the doorway since her husband's voice was coming from there. He smiled, ended the call, pocketed his phone and moved to the side of the bed. "Hey, sweetheart." He bent over and kissed her.

She smiled and wiped at some tears. "Hey."

"Oh, darlin', it's gonna be okay. You know that, right?"

She nodded. "Hormones. It's just that I feel so powerless. My babies are in another place, being taken care of by strangers. My other babies are at home after a difficult, traumatic day."

"Jodi and John were with them. You know that they know that they may be traumatized. And John would make sure he speaks with each of them and especially with Laynah."

Lisa sniffed. “But who’s taking care of Laynah. If only Jake were home.”

“Our Laynah is a strong girl.”

“She’s just a baby herself.”

“Did you think of yourself as a baby when you were her age?”

Lisa smiled and shook her head. “No. I thought I was all grown up. I was helping to run a large corporation and dealing with my mother.”

“How old were you when you and Glen got engaged?”

“I was twenty-four. But here’s our Laynah married at twenty.”

“She’ll be twenty-one in a few weeks.”

Lisa began to cry. “Do, do you think the babies will be home before her birthday?”

Chaz sighed. “I’m not sure. But they’re doing well and may not be in the NICU for long. That’s what the doctor said.”

“When did the doctor say that?”

“Earlier today.”

She shook her head. “I don’t remember.”

“It’s okay. It’s been quite a day.” He leaned over her, rested his elbow beside her head and used his other hand to brush a red curl off her face. He smiled at her. “Do you know I love you, Red? I mean, I didn’t think it was possible to love you more than I already do, but looking down at you right now, looking at this beautiful face, at this gorgeous hair, listening to you share your concerns about everyone except yourself. What an amazing person you are. So selfless. So strong.”

She sniffed. “Not feeling so strong right now.”

He put the bed rail down, kicked off his shoes. “Scoot over.”

She did as he asked and he laid down beside her, facing her, his right arm under her head, his left hand caressing her cheek. “You wanna cry, go ahead and cry. Get it out.”

His words started the fountain of tears. “Oh, Chaz, I don’t know why I feel like crying. I mean, I could be dead. The babies could be dead. Instead, we’re all still alive.”

“That’s right. And the babies could’ve been injured but they weren’t. And do you realize what a miracle it is that you have no serious injuries other than some cuts on your head and some bruises on your body. Today was a miracle.”

She looked up. “But poor Sara and the driver.”

“Her spine is fractured in two places, but the cord doesn't appear to be severed. The doctors are hopeful some of the paralysis is from swelling and that she'll regain movement as it comes down. They're cautiously optimistic about a very good recovery.”

“Really? That’s so good to know.”

“And the driver’s name was Martin Monroe. He was thirty-eight and had a wife and two kids. John has started a fund for his family and the Kinos have already made it go waaaay past the goal.”

“The Kinos are such good people, but why did this guy have to die?”

“Remember—God has a plan. Nothing is random. Remember what God

told Gabe, or maybe it was Grandmaster Kino, but He said that the good people that knew and loved Jesus when He was on earth, they prayed that God would save Him, they asked God to keep Jesus from being crucified. But God didn't save His own Son, because it was part of the plan. So, we have to stop questioning every time someone dies. Every time something bad happens. There are reasons. There is a plan. If God wants us to pick up that cross and bear it, then we will. I don't know why Martin died. I don't know whether there was some larger purpose in it or whether God will simply take something terrible and bring good from it. But I know He didn't abandon Martin or us."

He sighed heavily. "Earlier today I thought I was gonna be planning a funeral for my wife and two children. But apparently, you and the babies leaving the earth today was not part of the plan. It was a miracle that you survived. And I'm so grateful, Lisa. So, so grateful. Now, the other driver..."

"What other driver?"

He glanced down at her, his brow furrowed. "Remember Melaynah told you about the cement truck?"

"The cement truck?"

"Sweetheart, a guy in a cement truck had a heart attack and he swung into our lane, and hit the ambulance. It would've been head on, but Martin swerved, which is why the ambulance flipped several times."

"Oh, is that what happened?"

Chaz swallowed. "Yes, baby, and we've already told you that. You really don't remember?"

"Everything is such a blur."

"Maybe it's just from the shock and trauma, but you're worrying me. I think I'm gonna have a word with your doctor."

"Don't get too worried. There's been a lot going on today."

"Yeah, I guess so. Maybe it is just everything you've been through, but I'm still telling your doctor. You hit your head and I don't gamble with that."

Lisa sighed. "Okay. Anyway, so, thinking about what you just told me, I mean, don't you think it's a huge coincidence that the driver of the cement truck jerked the wheel at the exact moment to hit us?"

"Yes, and you know there are no such things as coincidences."

"So, what are you saying?"

"Well, these babies are important. They're supposed to come into this world at this time. They are meant to be. They weren't an accident. I mean, you're forty-six years old. We haven't used protection in years, and suddenly you get pregnant. With twins. And so does Lizzy. And our friends on the west coast all get pregnant. Jeffy, Kim, and Mickey, and Marissa and Bella and almost all of them are coming into the world about the same time, between November and January. These children are gonna be some of God's strongest warriors. They are children of light and they're important."

"Okay, they're important. And so?"

"And so, as Grandmaster Kino likes to say, the dark forces of the world, Satan and his minions, are working hard to stop these lights from coming into

the world. They tried with you, but God was with us and He protected the babies and He protected you."

"So, what kind of mission do you think these children have?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. We need to pray about that, seek answers. We might be on a 'need to know,' basis. They could be here to simply hold light in this world until the tribulation. They could be here to help with a great awakening or revival before the last days. Because I believe, Lisa, we are getting very close to what takes place in Revelation."

She nodded. "I believe that too. One only has to look around at the evil in this world that is encroaching from every corner to know, that we are quote, 'as in the days of Noah.' I wonder what our children's mission will be."

"I don't know. Do you think God told Mary what His plans were for Jesus? I mean, maybe she knew, or maybe she only felt it was something ominous. Maybe he shared it with her when he got older. Of course, our children are just human children. But still, if they have a special calling, we'll eventually know. So, until then, we do our very best to raise them close to the Lord, to teach them, to protect them from the dark forces. We will pray over them each and every day, like we do over the others. And we'll ask God what we can do to keep them safe, both physically, and spiritually."

Lisa yawned. "Chaz, it's such a blessing that I can depend on you, not just for your physical strength, but for your spiritual strength."

"Yeah, well, I'm trying. Ya know, I didn't do right by Cari and Julie. Cari begged me to talk to Jesus. I was so stubborn."

"So was she," Lisa said. "And I'm so grateful for that. She was so strong. It was her words that eventually brought you and I both to Jesus. Which meant, she brought our children to Jesus too. She fulfilled her mission and I'm truly grateful to her."

Chaz cleared his throat from the emotions that welled up. "Lisa, that is a beautiful thing to say. Lord have mercy, I love you so much."

"Chaz, will you hold me while I sleep? The babies will be ready for a feeding soon."

He pulled her close. "I got you, Lisa. Sleep baby."

✝✝✝

Psalm 127:3-5

"Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their opponents in court."

Chapter Sixteen

November 2nd, 12:00 AM, Saturday Morning
Stewart Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Melaynah peeked in at her little sister, Aralyn. She was sound asleep. Melaynah had to sing to her, tell her stories about their Mom and the new babies, explain to her that they are fine and will be coming home soon, and pray with her more than once. Finally, the adrenaline wore off and Aralyn was sleeping peacefully. Laynah then headed downstairs. Fourteen-year-old Charlie was sitting on the sofa in the den, his eyes closed. He appeared to be sleeping. Matthew had curled up on his side on the same sofa and was also asleep.

Laynah blew out a soft breath and went into the kitchen to straighten up. It'd been a long, hard day. She was drained, both physically and emotionally and what she wanted, what she craved more than anything in the world at this moment, was Jake's arms around her. Or even, just to hear his voice. The calls had been few and far between. She understood, but at this moment she felt like she might die without him. Realizing she was standing at the kitchen sink with the water running, she sniffed and turned the water off. She glanced up at the window above the kitchen table and gasped.

She stumbled backward, her heart and mind scrambling in her panic. Whoever it was took off. She grabbed her phone off the counter, her hands shaking. Her fingers moved to the 'J' and then hit 'call.'

"Hello, Laynah, you okay?"

"Uncle John, there's someone, there was..."

He put his phone on speaker as he started pulling on his jeans and shoes. "Okay, hon, slow down and tell me what's goin' on."

She drew a breath. "There was someone outside. A man. He was looking in the kitchen window."

He checked his weapon and tucked it in his jeans. "I'm on my way. Laynah, where's your gun?"

"It's up in my room."

"Go get it and put it on your hip. Is Charlie asleep?"

"Yes, sir, he's asleep in the den with Matt."

"And Aralyn?"

"She's asleep in her room."

"Okay, go wake Charlie and tell him to get his rifle and stay in Aralyn's room with Matt. Tell him he's last defense, like we've talked about. Do that first and then get your gun on your hip. Are the doors locked?"

"Yes, sir," she said on a sob.

"I'm almost there. Stay calm. It's gonna be alright, sweetie. I have a key. Don't shoot me when I come in the door. Stay on the phone with me and I'll tell you when I'm coming in."

She sniffed. "Yes, sir."

She did exactly what he said. She woke Charlie who'd immediately jumped into action like he'd rehearsed it a million times. In only seconds he and Matt were in Aralyn's room, protecting their little sister.

Laynah walked around downstairs making sure that what she said was true; the doors were locked. She turned off all the lights and went to the kitchen window to peer out, but she didn't see anything.

She felt relief when she heard the motor of an approaching vehicle.

"Laynah, are you still there?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's me coming in the front door."

She went into the front hall and watched the front door open. Her mind eased when she saw her father-in-law smile at her as he came inside. She ran to him and he hugged her hard, sticking his gun back in his waistband and taking hers from her.

"Okay, sweetie," he said gently. "I'm here. It's okay." He raised his head. "Charlie!" he yelled. "I'm here. It's okay. You can come down now. Rifle up."

Charlie and Matt both came down the stairs, Charlie with his rifle pointed toward the ceiling.

"And rifle down," John said quietly. He smiled. "Good job, boys."

"So, Uncle John, was this a drill or for real?" Charlie asked.

"It was real, guys. Your sister saw someone looking in the window." He nodded. "Hand me the rifle."

Charlie did and John emptied the chamber. "So, you kids have a seat in the den while I make a quick call and then we'll talk. Laynah, can you describe what you saw?"

She sighed. "I saw a white face, a man. He was looking in the window and looking right at me. He had on a hat, maybe a Braves hat. Dark shirt or coat maybe. As soon as our eyes met he ran away."

John nodded and walked into the kitchen to place his call. He came back a few minutes later and stood looking at three of the Stewart kids. Three of six. Well, one was an Appel. "So," he began. "It's been quite a day hasn't it?"

Charlie nodded. "What I thought would be a regular day at school and goin' to the football game tonight turned out a lot different."

"Well, Charlie, I know I've already said it, but you did a great job helping to bring those babies into the world."

Charlie nodded. "I admit, I was scared."

"We all were," Laynah said.

John looked down at twelve-year-old Matt. "How're you feelin' kiddo?"

Matt shrugged.

"Ya know, Matt, you did great too."

"I didn't do anything."

John smiled. "Is that what you think? Listen, cuz I know. Your dad and Laynah were so worried about your mom, and they were watching Charlie. All of them were concentrating on your mom and they just knew, without even asking you to, they just knew that you would take care of Aralyn. It was no surprise to them that when they turned around after the babies had been born that you were right there, holding Aralyn's hand. That's how strong and dependable you were. You didn't complain that you should be the one to crawl through that window and get all the glory. You just did what you knew had to be done."

"That's no big deal."

"Well, if Aralyn had wandered out to the street, or gotten behind one of those emergency vehicles and been hurt or run over, then the day would still have ended in tragedy. But you kept that from happening, and I think, and I know your mom and dad think, that it's a very big deal."

"I do too," Charlie said.

"Me too," Laynah said.

Matt shrugged, but his lips turned up slightly.

"You know how in football, the quarterback, or the receivers usually get all the glory, right? But if the line didn't block, if they didn't do their job in the trenches, then the QB couldn't do what he does. It's a team effort. And that's what today has been all about. Your family worked together like a team, earlier today, and just now. And I'm very proud of you all."

"Thanks, Uncle John," Charlie said.

He nodded. "Now, Charlie, you and Matt come give me a hug and go on up to bed. I wanna have a talk with your sister."

The boys immediately obeyed.

John sighed and looked at Laynah. "You okay?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir. Sorry I panicked. Who do you think would be all the way out here looking in our window?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Maybe one of Brett's loyal followers? Or some homeless vagrant? Who knows?"

Laynah nodded but kept silent.

"You miss him," John said softly.

Her eyes filled immediately and she nodded. "I feel like I'm gonna die without him."

"The longing is powerful. That's what Jodi once told me. The longing and the yearning makes you feel like life is miserable. I feel it too, because Jake is such a light. His presence is so powerful, so that when he goes away, it leaves only darkness."

"That's how I feel. Like I'm living in darkness. And how selfish is that of me right now, when I should be so happy that Mom and the babies are alive and well. And I AM happy that they are alive and well, but without Jake, it's like I'm living in darkness. I'm so sad. I can concentrate on the present moment for a time, but then, the sadness comes creeping in. I want so badly to share what happened today with him. I need for him to call and talk for longer

than five minutes. I thought we'd be able to talk more. He's only called me a few times. Do you think he's—okay?"

John nodded. "I do, because when I pray about him, my anxiety melts away. So I feel strongly that he's okay. Just busy. Or maybe out in the field. He can only call from their base of operations. If they're out on a mission, it could be a while. And once they get back, he may not be able to get to comms before he has to leave again."

Laynah wiped at her tears. "This is so hard. Much harder than I thought it would be."

"What did you tell Jake before he left? What did you tell him you would do while he's gone?"

She shrugged. "I don't remember really. I mean, um, I told him I'd wait for him to come back to me. I'd told him I'd be strong and take care of business while he was gone. I told him I'd keep the home fires burning."

"Ahh, there it is. That's what I wanted to hear."

"You wanted to hear about home fires?"

He smiled. "Yes. Remember I said Jake is a light. And when he leaves it seems so dark. Those home fires, that's your light. It's warm and bright and comforting. You have to shine your light brighter when he's gone to compensate for the darkness."

"How do I shine my light?"

"In Matthew chapter five it says to let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds, and glorify God. Not an exact quote but close enough. So that means you do good things for others and be a light, and you don't wallow in sadness and darkness and grieve. If you do this the longing will ease. It won't go away, but it won't consume you."

Laynah sighed. "I've been trying to do exactly what you're saying. I've been taking care of Mom, helping Aunt Lizzy, or helping Rose at the center. It helps for a little while, mostly because it keeps me focused on something other than Jake. But then, the moment I have a minute alone, my heart feels like it's gonna break."

"Let me ask you, Bugs, and don't be insulted by this question, but when you're doing all those things, do you do them with the inner thoughts of really accomplishing something good? Or are you thinking more about being longsuffering?"

She sighed. "I'm not quite sure what you mean."

"Well, in Proverbs it says, 'A glad heart maketh a cheerful countenance; But by sorrow of heart the spirit is broken.' And right now I'd say your spirit is broken. It also says in second Corinthians, 'Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.' So I'm wondering what's in your heart as you do those things. I don't think you're helping your mom reluctantly. I'm not really saying that. But maybe your heart isn't all the way into all of those things you're doing because you've reserved this little piece of your heart for the suffering over Jake's absence."

Laynah sat quietly, thinking about what he said. "So, what you're saying is I'm not putting my whole self into it. Wholeheartedly, with a cheerful and willing spirit."

"Maybe. It's not for me to judge. But clearly, even with all the things you're doing, you are still broken and sad and yearning. It's difficult to be a light to others when you feel so broken. Ask God to help you make your light shine, so that you can truly serve those around you. So that you can bring them light. So that no one has to worry about LaynahBug because she's filled with the light of God."

She nodded. "I want to do that. I don't want to feel this way anymore."

He smiled. "But you can't want to do that *because* you don't want to feel a certain way. You have to want to do that because you truly want to help others. It's such a minor adjustment in thinking, but it's important."

She nodded. "So, when I called you to come and help me, did it feel like a burden to you, to have to get out of bed, get dressed and come over here?"

He chuckled. "When Jodi and I prayed together before we went to bed, we asked, as usual, to know and recognize how we can help you."

"Me specifically? Or everyone."

"Everyone yes, but yes, you specifically."

"Why me specifically?"

"Uh, because you're my son's wife and because he asked us to take care of you, and to look after you, to help you in any way we could, and we are grateful for the opportunity to do whatever he asked of us while he serves and puts his life on the line to help others. Laynah, Jodi and I know you're suffering. We know you miss him. We know that because *we* miss him. But there are things to be grateful for. First, that you two are together, a married couple, husband and wife. He could be deployed again and you two remained nothing more than neighbors. I'm grateful that once you helped Jake to realize that you were supposed to be together, he worked fast and made it happen, so that's a good thing."

Laynah sighed. "When he knew, he knew and he didn't want to wait. He took immediate action. I can see that he learned that from you and Aunt Jodi. Y'all are such good people."

"We try to do God's work, and that's all. All glory to Him. And we're proud of Jake because he has embraced the same goal, to serve God. Which for you means that he'll be the best husband."

Laynah nodded. "He is such a good guy. And I love him so much."

"I know you do. I also know that he loves you. You, Laynah, are the most important person in his life. You're the only one that he knows emotionally, and spiritually, *and* physically. He knows you above everyone else. The fact that he hasn't been able to call you much is probably wearing very heavily on him, because he knows that you might be struggling with that."

"You're right, it probably is. And I don't want him to worry about me when he needs to concentrate on what he's doing." She sighed. "So that means I'll do better. I'll work to serve God, and be a light to others, and that will make

me the best wife for him."

John nodded. "Exactly. And like I said, Bugs, it's such a minor tweaking of why you are doing what you're doing."

Laynah smiled. "A cheerful heart willingly looking for ways to be a light to others." Her eyes opened wide and she jumped up. "I just saw a light flash on the wall behind you. There's someone in the backyard."

He nodded. "I asked Keegan to send over a couple of agents to look around, see what they can find."

She patted her chest as if to calm her heart. "Oh, okay, well, that's good."

"I doubt they'll find anything, but, you never know. Laynah, you have to be tired. Why don't you go on up and try to get some sleep."

"But..."

"I'm gonna stay here tonight. You can sleep without worry. Please try. You need to rest. Tomorrow is gonna be another long day."

She nodded. "Thanks Uncle John. I'll go up and try."

"I'll see you in the morning and I'll let you know if they find anything."

Laynah moved forward and hugged him. He wrapped his arms around her and patted her back. "All is well," he said softly.

✞✞✞

November 2nd, 7:00 AM, Saturday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Young Eric came up from the beach, took a quick shower and headed straight to Jordan's room. She was not sleeping peacefully. She whimpered a few times, tossing her head. He laid down on the bed beside her, rolled toward her and watched her. When she whimpered again he put his hand on the side of her face. "Shh, baby. Everything's okay. I got you."

Her eyes blinked open. He smiled down at her. "Good morning, Twenty-three."

She offered a slight smile. "Morning, Three." She stretched and yawned. "What time is it?"

"It's about 7:20 right now."

"Are you going in to train?"

"Not yet. However, you are gonna get up and go shower and dress and we're gonna go watch Taylor in the homecoming parade and then we're gonna go over to Granddad's house for lunch and a counseling session and he and I and Dad and some of the agents are gonna spar on the beach and you get to cheer me on."

"And what if I said I don't wanna go to the parade and don't wanna go over to Grandmaster Kino's house and don't really want to do anything?"

He frowned. "I'd say too bad. I'm not gonna let you sink down into some deep dark depression, so don't make me have to stage some sort of intervention with the whole family. Now get your butt up and get in the shower, or I'll drag you in there and wash you myself."

"Oh wouldn't you just love that, but I can't take a shower with my cast on."

"Yes you can. Mom got you a cast cover. It's in the bathroom. She said if

you need help, let her know and she'll help you."

Jordan sighed. He smiled. "You don't want to test me about this. Get up. I'm gonna go down and make us a smoothie and you need to hurry because I don't wanna miss my sister in this parade. She's never been recognized at school that much. She's actually had a hard time making friends and this year she's beginning to come into her own and I don't want to miss her and she would be devastated if you weren't there for her."

"Where is everyone? Have they all left already?"

"Gabe took Taylor to the parade. Alec and Desi followed them over. Mom is waiting to see if you need any help and if I give her a thumbs up, she and Dad are going to find a place along the parade route."

Jordan sighed and frowned and apparently didn't move fast enough for his liking. He rose up and jerked the covers off the bed. She gasped as he scooped her up and carried her into the bathroom and sat her on the countertop and picked up the box that held the cast cover and read the directions.

He eyed her. "Are you wearing anything underneath that nightshirt?"

"That is none of your business. What is wrong with you?"

"Babe, I'm not trying to be pushy, or, maybe I am, but I see what's happening. I see you withdrawing and I love you too much to allow it, so, I'm making it my business. I'm not gonna just go off and let you stay here all sad, or scared or alone. So, I'm gonna motivate you the only way I know how. It might not be doctor recommended, but I'm all you got right now. Go to the parade and if you still don't wanna do anything else, so be it. So, are you wearing anything under that nightshirt?"

"Not a thing," she said, her chin lifted in defiance and her eyes glowing with righteous indignation.

He tried not to smile and nodded. "Good." He bent down in front of her and got the cast cover on. "There. That should work." He set her down on the floor. "Now all you have to do is pull the nightshirt over your head and take a shower. You need one. And you'll feel a lot better. Stand right there and I'll get your crutches."

He quickly retrieved the crutches from the side of the bed and brought them to her. "I'm gonna go make our breakfast. I'll be back up here to pray with you in about twenty minutes, so you'd better work fast."

She glared at him.

He laughed. "You need help getting your shirt off?"

"I most certainly do not. Get out of here."

He nodded. "I'm going." He quickly left the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Thirty minutes later he came back into her room without knocking. She was wearing a pair of the special pants his mom had purchased for her, designed especially to accommodate a cast. This one appeared to be like jeans, but was of a stretchy material and zipped down the side from knee to ankle. She had on a white shirt with a short blue-jean jacket and was sitting on the bed tying her one athletic shoe. Her hair was still wet. She didn't even look up

at him. He'd made her mad and he thought that was funny and cute and a lot better to be mad than sad.

He sat down on the bed beside her. "Good job, Jordan. You made it, though I did give you a little extra time."

"Bite me," was her only response.

"Okay." He pushed her back on the bed.

She giggled. Taking that as an invitation, he rolled over on her, and bit down on the tender flesh just under her jaw. He raised his head. "You smell really good."

"Hmph," she said, still pretending to be mad.

He nuzzled her neck, kissed her softly there and moved to her mouth. He gave three quick, soft kisses before he laid one on her. She gave a soft moan. Reluctantly ending the kiss he lifted his head and sighed. "One day, baby. One day."

"One day what?" she asked.

He smiled. "You know." He rose. "Come on, I'll help you make the bed."

They worked together and then he patted the bed. "Sit down here."

She did as ordered, and he sat beside her and took her hands in his and began to pray. His prayer was spoken softly, and was so filled with his love and concern for her as he spoke to God and asked blessings on her that she couldn't stay mad at him any longer. What was she mad at anyway? Nothing really. He made her get up and get going. What was she, some petulant child? He was helping her to get back on track and suddenly, she was grateful. He ended the prayer.

"Thank you, Eric," she said softly.

He smiled, a twinkle in his eye. "It was my pleasure. Come on, let's go."

✞✞✞

Gabe went live on his social media for the parade. It wasn't very long, not in distance and not in participants. It went less than a couple of miles from the staging area, which was a parking lot of a local grocery store, down the street, making one turn onto the street where the school was and ending in the parking lot of the school.

The participants consisted of the marching band, the cheerleaders, the drill team and dance team. A small float for the football players to ride on and a bunch of fancy cars that carried school officials, town officials, important alumni and a couple of pro football players who'd gone to school at Brookside. There was also the school tiger mascot, and a bunch of students dressed all crazy running around and tossing out candy at the crowd.

The main float, however, was the float carrying the homecoming court with Taylor as queen in the place of honor. Taylor was stunning in her dress, the same formal she'd worn the night before. At the dance tonight she would wear a shorter dress, though still considered formal. Gabe smiled as he thought about his girl. When one of the girls made a snide comment about Taylor intending to wear the same dress in the parade as she wore on the field last night, Taylor seemed completely unaffected and only shrugged. "Isn't it silly,"

she'd said, "that we think we can't wear the same dress twice? Another dress would cost a lot of money that would be much better used donated to Gabe's foundation, which is exactly what my mom did."

Gabe took a moment to explain that conversation on his live video and issued an invitation to anyone else who wanted to do the same, or how cool would it be if they could think of another thing they could do without and send the proceeds to any good cause. "If you have ideas, comment below and we'll talk about some of your ideas and make it a challenge." He grinned as the comment section blew up. Skimming down he read aloud some of the ideas pouring in.

"*SweetCandy* says to give up the fifteenth pair of boots you were about to buy. *Donny25* says to use your old bat or make your glove last another year by oiling it and taking care of it. *Maximum11* says to tell people to donate in your name for Christmas or to just give whatever cash you get for Christmas, and *SeekingJesus* says to skip eating out for a day and donate the money you would have spent on food, but don't be all like, 'I'm fasting' patting yourself on the back." He smiled. "These are all great ideas and you guys rock."

Young Eric and Jordan cheered for Taylor as she passed and she smiled and waved at them. Eric senior and Shelley brought the little ones who were having lots of fun trying to pick up candy and waving at everyone. Melody was not working today, but Logan invited her to come see the parade with him and she'd agreed.

Jordan was interested in seeing how Melody acted around Logan because of how Jordan felt sorry for Logan when that Angi girl had so obviously gone out with him only because he was a member of the Kino family. Jordan hadn't had a chance to get to know Melody yet, but she seemed sweet. She was definitely pretty. Jordan watched her as Logan leaned down and said something to her. Melody laughed and pointed at someone in the parade and then Logan laughed.

"Whatcha lookin' at, Two-Three?" young Eric asked.

She smiled up at Eric. "Melody and Logan. They really make a cute couple, don't ya think?"

He nodded. "Well, let's not rush him. They'd make a good couple, but they're not a couple yet. But yeah, would be nice if they date."

Jordan nodded. "What about JoJo?"

"What about him?"

"Does he date much?"

"Nope. He says he has enough on his plate just concentrating on football and his classes."

"Has he ever had a girlfriend?"

"A few. He had a few girlfriends in middle school. One of them he was pretty close with but she moved away. Then there was the girl when he was a sophomore in high school. After a year together, he overheard her talking to a friend about trying to get him to get her pregnant so that she would always be related to our family."

"Seriously? How sick is that?"

"Right? And then the only other girl he's ever been interested in is now married to Jake Appel."

"Laynah?"

Young Eric nodded. "We call them the east coast portion of our family. The Stewarts, Appels, Tanners, Nashes. They come to visit us in Cali at least once a year and we've been to visit them in Georgia or in Tennessee, at least once a year. JoJo thought Laynah was hot."

"Uh, yeah, because she is."

Young Eric laughed. "Yep. And she even kissed him a few times. But that was just to make Jake take notice of her."

"Did it work?"

"Well, not really. I mean, not at that time. Jake was goin' into the military and that's all he was focused on. But apparently, when he came back from his first deployment, Laynah finally got his attention and within just a few months, they got married."

"So, poor JoJo, he got used a couple of times."

"I guess, though I wouldn't think of what Laynah did as using him, because he was using her too. I mean, he was trying pretty hard to get those kisses. So yeah, he's pretty jaded on girls. Though, meeting you has given him hope that it's possible that maybe one day he'll find a genuine, sweet, gorgeous girl too."

Jordan giggled. "Yeah, and maybe his girl won't have so much baggage."

Young Eric shook his head. "Your baggage, as you call it, is your past and it doesn't bother me at all to help you carry it. Your past is what makes you who you are, and I love who you are. You're the best, Jordan, the best, and I'm grateful for you every minute of every day."

She grinned. "Those are mighty mushy words, Three."

He nodded. "Yep, and I'm not a bit ashamed of that." He turned to her, took her face in his hands and kissed her.

"And here's, well— now they're kissing," Gabe said. "But let's see if they'll look up and give us a statement. Young Eric, Jordan, do you have anything to say about the Challenge coming up one week from today?"

Eric and Jordan parted slowly and turned toward Gabe.

"Ya know, you have lousy timing," young Eric said, making Gabe chuckle.

"Sorry, man, but I'm about to sign off and my viewers wanted to hear from you," Gabe explained.

"Well, I'm looking forward to the Challenge. We'll just see if I have what it takes to add to the Kino legacy."

"Are you nervous at all?" Gabe asked.

"No. Are you?"

Gabe smiled. "Nope. Ready, like you say, to see what I got." Gabe turned his phone toward Jordan.

"What about you, Jordan? Are you nervous for young Eric?"

She smiled. "Honestly?"

"Always."

She nodded. "Well, yeah. I've been privileged to be able to watch several training sessions and I have to say, they are brutal, and Eric has been pounded on by some very lethal guys. So, it makes me nervous about what's to come."

Young Eric grinned at her words. She didn't realize it, but they were perfect. It made her sound as if she didn't think he'd win. That would go viral, and his opponents would get comfortable, maybe even complacent. He liked it and he knew his grandfather would also like it.

Gabe frowned as his phone was buzzing and he lifted it and read a few of the comments that were blowing it up. "Hmm, okay, so Jordan, so, a bunch of my viewers are saying that they heard about the guy who assaulted you and they're saying that they prayed for your speedy recovery and they hope you're doing better. So, like, you okay answering that?"

Jordan nodded and smiled sweetly. "Thank you all very much." She touched her face. "It was scary and I'm obviously still recovering and I don't know yet when I'll be able to get back to play softball for UCLA, so your continued prayers will always be appreciated."

Gabe ended the interview and went on to speak to Logan and ask him about his gig tonight, and then gave the followers a treat and let them see the little Kinos who all smiled and waved at the camera. Finally, he got Grandmaster Kino, Miss Shelley, Ricky and Bree to wave at the camera and signed off.

Jordan sighed and smiled up at young Eric. "Thanks for making me get up and come this morning."

"You're welcome. Thanks for coming. I'm hungry. You ready for some lunch and good times at my grandparents' house?"

She nodded. "Yes. Yes I am."

✝✝✝

November 2nd, Saturday Night

The Caffeine Factor CoffeeHouse, UCLA Campus

Melody told Logan she'd meet him at the coffeehouse. She hadn't known exactly how long it would take her to get there and she didn't want to be late, so she ended up arriving early. She hoped that didn't make her seem too eager. Not that she was trying to impress the very cute guy, but he was definitely interesting and she was flattered that he seemed to be interested in her.

She knew he was her employers' grandson and she wanted everything to be on the up and up so she told Miss Shelley that Logan had asked her to come watch him. The sweet lady had been very pleased. She said that Logan was a fine young man, and very talented and that Melody was in for a treat. Melody had a feeling that Miss Shelley's definition of a fine young man and Melody's definition was a little different. Either way, Logan was definitely "fine."

Currently he was speaking with the manager of the coffeehouse. He finished his conversation and left the place and came back in a few minutes later, carrying a large amplifier. At least, that's what she thought it was. He set it down off to the side of the seating area and came to her with a smile. "Hey Melody, you're here early."

She nodded. "I wasn't sure how long it would take me to get here and I hate

being late for anything, so here I am," she said with a shrug.

He smiled. She was so adorable. She was dressed casually, in jeans and a soft, goldish-brown sweater with white athletic shoes. Her hair was down and straight and came just past her shoulders. He hadn't decided yet if it was dark blond or light brown. Or maybe brown with gold highlights. Whatever it was, it was clean and shiny and beautiful. Her beautiful face was, well, beautiful. Her hazel eyes shining. Her lips soft and pink. He cleared his throat. "Well," he said. "I'm really glad you came. I hope you like it."

She nodded. "I'm sure I will."

"Okay, well, I have to finish setting up and then warm up."

"Do you need some help?"

He frowned and then nodded. "Sure. You can save me a trip and carry the guitar in for me."

She followed him to his car. He reached in the back, pulled out the guitar case and handed it to her, then reached in again and pulled out a mic stand and a cardboard box.

"Are you nervous?" she asked him as they headed back inside.

He shook his head. "I don't usually get too nervous. I just love to sing and am excited about every opportunity."

She smiled.

Melody watched him set up. He was all business, setting up his area, pulling electrical cords and mics out of the box, plugging things in, adjusting the mic stand. He tested the mic, tested the guitar, set it on a stand, smiled at Melody and came to see her again.

"So, can I get you anything? Coffee? A drink? A sandwich, doughnut?"

"Hmm, I haven't eaten, so a sandwich and maybe a juice?"

He nodded. "They have a great chicken salad sandwich."

"Sounds good."

"And apple, cranberry, mango or orange?"

"I'll try mango."

"Be right back."

She watched him as he ordered her food. He was really cute. He had brown hair and blue eyes. His hair was trimmed neatly on the sides, but longish on top and brushed back away from his face, though some of it fell forward onto his forehead. He had dark lashes, a perfect, straight nose, beautiful lips and gorgeous smile. And he looked really good in the jeans he was wearing, paired with a blue and white striped knit shirt that showed off his physique. He looked every bit as fit as all of the Kino family. His chest looked strong. His biceps, ripped. His thighs and backside, muscular. Giving her head a slight shake, she schooled her thoughts.

He brought her sandwich and juice on a tray and set it on the table in front of her.

"Thank you."

"My pleasure. Well, I need to warm up."

She nodded. "I'm looking forward to it."

He smiled and went to pick up his guitar and take a seat on the stool next to his amp. He strummed a few times, then started playing a song she recognized, *Pretty Woman.* He looked right at her and winked and she got a feeling he was flirting with her.

People began filing into the shop as he warmed up. Young Eric and Jordan came in too. Jordan came to sit at the seat saved for her while young Eric ordered two bottles of water and two cheese and nut protein boxes. Jordan smiled at Melody as she approached. Melody jumped up. "Can I help you get seated?"

Jordan nodded. "Yes, and thank you."

Melody pulled out the chair for her and helped her ease down onto it.

"Are you feeling any better?" Melody asked.

Jordan nodded. "A little. I'm still in a lot of pain most of the time. But Three is taking good care of me."

Melody smiled. "Nate told me that you call Eric 'Three.' Very cute."

Jordan smiled. "Yes he is."

Melody giggled.

"And so is Logan," Jordan said.

Melody looked over at him. He was now playing Malagueña and it was pretty darn impressive. She nodded. "Totally," she said softly.

"So, are you interested?" Jordan asked.

Melody smiled. "Wow, you don't mess around, do ya?"

Jordan giggled. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I mean, he's really cute. He seems really nice. He's very much a gentleman, like, in an old-fashioned kind of way and I like that."

Jordan nodded. "The Kino men, are all like that. They are very protective of their women. The young guys are good to their mothers and sisters. The older guys are so good to their wives. It didn't take long for me to realize that this family is very special and very different than the rest of the world."

Melody nodded. "They seem to be. When the Kinos hired me to help with the children, I was immediately blown away by the way they do things. Mr. Kino is so kind to Miss Shelley. And he teaches the children to be respectful to her. He will not allow them one second to give Miss Shelley a hard time. It's pretty cool. But he doesn't yell at them. He speaks so softly and calmly. I agree with you. They are special people. And I love coming to work."

Jordan smiled. "That's always a plus, instead of having a job you dread going to, right?"

Melody nodded and smiled at young Eric as he approached.

"Hello, Melody. It's nice to see you again."

"You too, Eric, um, I mean, young Eric."

He smiled. "You can just call me Eric when my grandfather is not around." He unloaded the tray and went to put the tray away.

They chatted and ate. A few minutes later, young Eric rose and welcomed Alec and Desi to the table with them. He asked them if he could get them anything and then went to place the order. Five minutes later, he was

graciously serving the young couple. Finally Logan finished warming up, glanced at his phone and then spoke into his mic.

"Hello, everyone and welcome to a special edition of *The Caffeine Factor.* Sit back, relax, and enjoy some Saturday night tunes. I'm gonna begin with a request made by my cousin Eric, who's here tonight. Eric and Jordan, this is for you."

Jordan smiled as Logan sang *I'm Yours*, a song by Jason Mraz.

As Logan's beautiful voice rang out clear over the crowd, they all quieted. Melody looked around. They were mesmerized. And so was she. She had no idea he was this good. She sighed. She could listen to him sing all night. He may just be singing at a little coffeehouse, but he was so good, she had a feeling that one day, he'd be handed one of those golden awards in the shape of an old phonograph.

✝✝✝

November 3rd, Sunday Afternoon
Copeland Home, Hillcrest, California

Ricky Kino drove up to Destiny Copeland's family home. He pulled into the drive of a nice, upper-middle-class home located in an equally nice subdivision called "The Colony at Hillcrest." The homes were large, well-maintained, nicely landscaped, and had expensive cars sitting in driveways outside of double garages. Most of the homes were a light tan-colored brick, but some had stone siding. The yards were probably a good quarter-acre. People who lived in the subdivision definitely made a good living.

Ricky thought about the words he'd just spoken at *Lake Forest Baptist* where the Copelands attended church every Sunday. His topic had been about forgiveness and "what would Jesus do," and the importance of family, and priorities. After the meeting, he'd been profusely thanked and his hand shaken, and his picture taken. Then he finally moved forward to speak to Dustin Copeland and his wife, Marvenia Copeland.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Kino," Dustin said as he offered his hand. "I had no idea that you would be offering the sermon here today."

Ricky nodded. "Nice to meet you too." He turned and offered his hand to Marvenia. "And you too, Mrs. Copeland. I hadn't intended to speak here today, but last year I promised your pastor that I would come to your church and speak and when I made the appointment with you and your wife, I gave the pastor a call and told him I'd be in the area."

"That was a fine sermon, Mr. Kino," Marvenia said.

"Thank you. All glory to God."

"Absolutely," Dustin said. He smiled. "So, Marvenia and I are heading to the house. Would you like to follow us?"

Ricky glanced at his watch. "I need to speak with Pastor Frank for a few minutes, but I'll be on my way to you shortly. Thank you again, for taking the time to meet with me."

"It's our pleasure," Marvenia said sweetly.

Ricky watched them leave and then turned to find the Pastor. He'd decided

to confide in the Pastor what his goal was for the Copelands, which currently was to help heal the family and reunite Destiny Copeland with her family. Before he left the head pastor, they'd prayed together over the situation. Ricky hoped he'd be given the right words to say and that his meeting with the family wouldn't make things worse. He wasn't afraid of confrontation. He was only afraid of misjudging or becoming angry.

Now Ricky stepped out into the driveway in front of the Copeland home, whispered a soft prayer, headed to the door and rang the doorbell.

In only a few seconds Marvenia Copeland opened one of the large, ornate double doors, each with a beautiful fall wreath hanging on it. "Mr. Kino, please come in."

Ricky smiled and stepped inside. "You have a lovely home," he said, knowing that was important to them.

"Oh, thank you!"

He glanced around the foyer at the high ceiling and crystal chandeliers. The area was meticulously decorated. An eye-catching crystal bowl sat on the entryway table, filled with the likeness of fruit, only the fruit was all golden. There were three large ceramic candle holders holding three white pillar candles. A small plant in a hammered brass container and on the second shelf of the table sat two large seagrass baskets sitting on either side of a large southwestern style vase holding some dried stems of cotton. Behind this table was a large mirror and across from this table was a beautiful staircase with a curving polished wood banister. Just next to one side of the staircase was a wooden bench, upholstered in white, with a small, Native American blanket throw folded perfectly and hanging over one end.

She led him through the entranceway, past the staircase and turned left into a large living room, again, meticulously decorated. The air smelled of vanilla due to the candles burning on one of the end tables on the side of a large, expensive-looking, beige-colored sofa with an array of fancy throw pillows.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Kino and I'll tell my husband you're here."

"No need, I heard the doorbell," Dustin Copeland said as he entered from the other side of the room.

Ricky stood quickly and shook hands. "Mr. Copeland."

Dustin nodded. "Please have a seat."

Ricky sat back down.

"May I get you something to drink?" Marvenia asked.

"Some water would be great," Ricky said casually.

"Filtered, spring or sparkling," she asked.

Ricky smiled. "Sparkling, thank you."

"I'll be right back. Oh, honey, would you like anything?"

"No, I'm fine."

"I was telling your wife, you have a lovely home."

Dustin smiled. "Thank you. It was Marvenia's dream home."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Fifteen years."

"May I ask you, Mr. Copeland, what business you're in?"

"I'm an accountant."

Ricky nodded as Marvenia came back into the room with a crystal glass of sparkling water with a small lemon wedge on the edge of the glass. He rose and accepted the water. "Thank you."

She smiled. "My pleasure."

He looked into the eyes of each person. "So, I won't beat around the bush. Let me say thank you once more, for agreeing to see me."

"Well, we don't get calls from a movie star often asking to come to speak to us. Actually, my husband does, because of his line of work, but they usually don't want to come to our home, and of course..."

"Marvenia."

Ricky looked over at Dustin, who'd spoken firmly.

"Oh, sorry. I tend to go on and on sometimes."

"No worries, Mrs. Copeland. I told you on the phone that I have news of your daughter and I won't keep you waiting any longer. Destiny is doing well right now, but she's had a very hard time."

"How did you come to know our daughter?" Dustin asked.

"My son, Eric, was helping a homeless man at a store near here."

"Oh, yes, I heard the story of how he was giving food to a homeless man and that's when he was kidnapped."

Ricky nodded. "Correct. He'd promised that man that he would help him get off the streets, and so, the day after Eric was rescued from the kidnappers he remembered his promise to that man and came down here to meet with him and I tagged along, because, well, my son had just come through a terrible ordeal and I was feeling a little clingy," he said with a smile. "But the homeless guy wasn't there where he usually was and we searched in the woods at the rear of the store and found a grouping of tents. Your daughter came out of one of those tents."

Marvenia's eyes opened wide. "She was homeless?"

Ricky glanced up at her and tried to let go of the sudden flash of temper. What did she expect? He sighed. Anger wouldn't help the situation. He nodded. "Yes. She'd apparently been through a very hard time. When she was asked to leave home she tried to contact some aunts, I'm not sure what side of the family they were on, and they turned her down.

"She stayed at a couple of her friends' homes for a few weeks. When Alec learned she had nowhere to go, he put his plans to go to college on hold, got a job and found a place for them to live. But it wasn't a very nice area and his car was vandalized to where it was not drivable, so he started taking the bus to work. Because of the bus not running on schedule, he was late to work a few times, he lost his job, they lost the apartment and they found themselves homeless."

"So, that boy is still with her?"

"Yes. He couldn't leave her alone to fend for herself. He loves her."

"If he loved her he wouldn't have done what he did to her," Dustin said.

Ricky smiled kindly. "They were in love. He didn't do it *to* her. They were both willing participants."

"I don't want to hear that," Dustin said sharply.

Ricky realized that this man was used to being in complete control of everyone and everything around him, but he certainly did not intimidate Ricky and so he went on. "I know it's hard for you to hear. And it's a lot easier to blame the guy. I get that. We're men and men are ultimately responsible. But really, they are both kids and *both* of these kids simply made a consensual mistake. They both know they did and they're both paying for it, and they're both sorry."

"I bet they are."

Ricky sighed. "Let me ask you this, if we were to see this from your perspective, you said, he did it to her."

Dustin nodded.

"Then that would make her a victim, right?"

"Yes."

"Then why would you throw the victim out of the house?"

His eyes opened wide. "How dare you..."

"How dare I what? State it like it is? Let's just use that scenario for a minute. You say that Alec did something to Destiny. There are places and cultures where real victims are blamed or punished for what someone else did to them. I know that can't seem right to you."

"No, of course not," Marvenia put in quickly.

Ricky glanced at her. Obviously, she was used to placating her husband. He went on. "So, if we go with your thought that this is all Alec's fault, that he forced or seduced Destiny, took her virginity and got her pregnant, why would you throw *her* out of the house?" He paused. "That was a rhetorical question. I know the answer. It's because you do hold her at least partially responsible. She disobeyed your rules, more importantly, she disobeyed God's rules and you felt she should be punished. Or was it more like, you didn't want to have to deal with the embarrassment of having a teenage daughter who was pregnant? What would it say about you as parents? How could you hold your heads up in the social circle in which you move, especially at church?"

He stopped, sighed, and looked from husband to wife. Their silence meant he hit the truth. "Look, I'm not here to judge you. My only reason for being here is to help you. I truly mean that. Let me have my say on Destiny's behalf and I'll leave and you'll never have to hear from me again. But I hope that's not how this will end. Because I do truly want to help heal this situation, if not for your sake, then for Destiny's sake."

"Say what you have to say," Dustin ordered.

Ricky picked up his glass, took a few swallows of water and set it down. "That day when we came upon your sweet daughter, her condition was not good. She was very thin, obviously pregnant, very dirty, smelly, hungry, dark circles under her eyes. I didn't even know until later after my wife got her cleaned up, that her hair was blond. She was truly pitiful. Anyone with a half

a heart, would've stopped to help her. She was so sad and afraid.

"So, we took her and Alec home with us and got them cleaned up and got them help. Ya know, Alec is a sharp young man. He was senior class president. Had close to the highest GPA in the school. Had a full-tuition ride to USC based purely on academics and leadership. That is rare. His only mistake was falling in love with your daughter. And he does love her. Deeply. So much that he threw away what he'd achieved to try to take care of her. Though, babies having babies is not optimal and he didn't quite know how to go about it.

"We've had many counseling sessions, Alec, Destiny, my wife and I. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that your daughter is highly intelligent, articulate, and of course, beautiful. But I might need to tell you that she loves you very much, and she very much wants to be in your life and wants you to be part of her life. All of you. She says she has an older sister?"

"Yes. Charity. She's actually here today. She's upstairs in her room giving us some privacy," Marvenia stated.

Ricky nodded. "The very first counseling session I had with these kids, I asked Destiny if she had three wishes, what would she wish for, no matter how hard it would seem to obtain, no matter the price, just say it. I was surprised by her answer. The first thing she wished for, was to have her family back. That somehow, you would forgive her and be part of her and her child's life." He stopped and looked at them. Dustin sat with his lips pressed tightly together. Marvenia had tears in her eyes.

"The second thing she wished for is that Alec and his mother would also reconcile and be a part of their lives. A very loving and unselfish wish to make. And her final wish was to finish high school." He paused, took a drink. "Now, just to keep you in the loop, we have contacted people who are specialists in helping in these types of situations and we have also called in a few favors. As it turns out, Alec's scholarship has been reinstated, but he won't start school until next fall term. So, he's behind a year. Not too bad. He also has been given an internship at the law firm of Lee and Adams, which is one of the top law firms in the state.

"He and Destiny will be living in a small but very nice home close to USC, starting next summer. Until then, they will be living in a home just south of LA. Alec will be working at Lee and Adams up until he leaves for school. He has a bright future ahead of him. He's smart, hardworking, honest, and he loves your daughter. Now, I've been told, Mr. Copeland, that you were very angry with her and it was you who ordered her out of your home, out of the only home she's ever known. And I understand you being angry. She messed up all your plans. However, there is a time when we must forgive. You might be angry because she embarrassed you as a Christian. Yet, even more so, you're embarrassing yourself."

Dustin Copeland jumped to his feet, his face red with anger.

Ricky shrugged slightly, but remained calm and stayed seated. "A Christian realizes that we are all human and we make mistakes. A Christian doesn't condemn others. We don't look the other way either. We confront evil and we

don't tolerate evil, but we don't condemn. That's not our role. Our role is to forgive, and have compassion and to love those who use us or persecute us. Our role is to love each other as Jesus loved us. Unconditionally. I get that you're a proud man. I also get that you like to be in control. Still, the only thing you really control is your own actions."

"If she lives in my house, she will follow my rules," he said loudly as he paced back and forth. "She will give that child up for adoption and go back to school and take her medicine."

Ricky sighed. "Well, I don't think she wants to actually move back in. She just wants you to love her. She wants to be your little girl again. She wants your forgiveness and she's trying to forgive you."

"Forgive *me?*"

"Yeah, Dad, and I wish her luck with that."

Ricky looked up to see another beautiful girl come into the room. Unlike Destiny, her hair was dark brown. She was slim and dressed nicely. She came straight to him and held out her hand.

"Hi. I'm Charity, Destiny's older sister, and I want to be in touch with my sister. Up until now, my father has insisted that if I help Destiny then I can't live here anymore and he won't continue to pay for my college, but sitting on the steps listening to you tell what Alec and Destiny have been willing to give up for each other, then I'm ready to do that too. I'll go homeless if I have to, and stop going to school and get a job at Mickey D's if I have to, but I want to see my sister."

Ricky nodded. "I know she'll be extremely happy to see you."

"And Dad, you need to just stop. Yeah, it's exactly like what Mr. Kino said. She messed up your plans for her and she embarrassed you, so you're mad at her. Well, I'm mad at you. How dare YOU not help your youngest child, my sister, when she got into trouble. And how dare YOU try to keep everyone else from helping her. You told me not to help her or even talk to her. And I'm sure you said the same to Mom and to Aunt Minni and Aunt Jess. You DO try to control everyone and ya know what? I'm sick and tired of it.

"So, Dad, you can stop being a fake Christian and actually try to be a real Christian and show love to your little girl. How can you not have feelings for that little baby girl? And yeah, she messed up and yeah, she's about to have a child. *You* will have a grandchild. Do you intend to ignore her baby the rest of your life, or are you gonna love that child? You're just embarrassed that your daughter got pregnant and it doesn't fit into your rich social status. Well, what is it Jesus said about rich people?" She turned to look at Ricky with a question on her face.

"You mean Matthew 19:24 where it says, '...I tell you, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God?'"

Charity smiled. "Yeah, that's the one. And then there's the other one, about the kid who ran away and squandered all his money and wanted to come back to his father."

"The prodigal son," Ricky said with a smile. "It's in Luke, chapter fifteen. One of the things we learn from that story is that God's love for us doesn't depend on how good or faithful we are. His love for us is unconditional. He loved us while we were still sinners. Though we mess up, and do stupid things, God is still our loving Father and if we repent and come back to Him, He will accept us back with open arms."

Charity nodded. "Yeah, that's a good one."

Ricky nodded. "It is a good one and well-done, Charity." He glanced at Dustin, whose face was pale. It was time to leave the pot cookin' for awhile. "But Charity, don't be too hard on your dad. Ya know, us parents, we make mistakes too. We can sometimes get caught up in all the amazing plans we make for our family that we forget sometimes that we have to stop and change directions, or go an alternate route. And the good thing is, the lesson in the prodigal son can be applied to us parents too. We can ask forgiveness and our children will hopefully not hold all of our faults against us."

Ricky stood. "Mr. and Mrs. Copeland, I just want you to know that Destiny is in good hands and she desperately wants to see you. She and Alec want to make things right. They're gonna get married and they want to do it soon before they move into the house they'll occupy for the next year. They'd like to marry in your church, which Pastor Frank has already given permission for, but if you don't want that, then they'll marry on our front lawn. It would make both of them very happy if you would reach out and maybe even take part in their special day. But don't give me an answer. Think about it. Pray about it." He reached into his suit jacket pocket. "Here's her new phone number."

He turned and walked toward the front door. Marvenia rushed past him to open the door for him. He turned again and shook Dustin Copeland's hand, then Marvenia's hand and then smiled at and shook Charity's hand. She suddenly leaned forward and hugged him.

He smiled at her. "Call her. She'll be so happy to hear from you."

"I'm goin' to. Right now."

"Good." He looked at the three of them and smiled. "Thanks again for your time, and just in case you'd like to know, it's a boy, and he's due at the end of January."

Marvenia gasped. Charity squealed with delight. Dustin nodded.

Ricky took his leave.

✞✞✞

James 2:13

"... because judgment without mercy
will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.
Mercy triumphs over judgment."

Chapter Seventeen

The following week went by as a normal week. Which only meant that no one almost died, no one was attacked or kidnapped and everyone tried to go about their business with no distractions. Though even with that, you really couldn't call it a normal week.

It was the week when the second ever Mini-MART was happening on Friday, and the 22nd Kino Challenge was happening on Saturday. It was also the week when the young lady responsible for fighting off a serial rapist, therefore bringing about his capture, went back to attend her classes, a notable security agent at her side.

Agent Wyatt walked her into her classes, got her settled in her seat then stood right outside the classroom door during class. He carried her backpack and her purse. He'd asked if she'd rather have him push her around in a wheelchair and that way she could keep her leg elevated but she thought that walking on the crutches was helping her to stay stronger, so she declined.

Jordan continued to stay at the Kinos' home, but also stayed in her own room and let young Eric rest and focus on the coming event. She'd had a few meltdowns and several more counseling sessions. But that wasn't extraordinary; it was more like par for the course.

Young Eric had also had several more counseling sessions to make sure his mind was in the right place for the Challenge.

Gabe, too, was called to sit in the "hot seat" a few times to make sure his mind was right. He stayed at the elder Kinos' home until after his session on Thursday afternoon, after which he headed to spend the evening with Taylor. He had to be at the arena the next day, hydrated, carbed, and ready to fight.

Jewell Perez met with Mark Adams and signed all of the necessary paperwork to have her name and her children's names changed to Brooks. It would be a few months before they would receive the decree for the new name. In the meantime, she took a leap of faith and quit her job. She'd met with her investor, Ricky Kino, who made her believe that her dream really was going to happen. To prove it, he challenged her to prepare several items to sell at the concessions at both the Mini-MART and the Challenge and they would charge a reasonable price that would not only recoup their expenses, but would make a big profit. She worked hard all week preparing large, all-natural, all-organic, chewy, delicious cookies, rosemary-garlic pretzels, and some caramel apple nachos.

In Georgia, the Stewart babies were released from the NICU and three days later, on Thursday afternoon, both mother and babies were headed home. It

was a joyous time. The town and the church, organized by Jodi Appel, kept a steady stream of wholesome home-cooked meals coming to the Stewart home. Jodi told Lisa that no matter how much she said they didn't need to do that, the meals would continue to come for a solid two-week period.

Many of those meals were cooked by Lily Anderson, who graduated from culinary school, and was the person to whom Miss Maddie had gifted all of her recipe books.

The Stewarts had a stream of family members and very close friends lined up to come in and help Lisa with the babies or help Chaz with the ranch so that he could in turn help his wife with the babies. The brothers and sisters of the babies were totally in awe of them. Even Charlie and Matt were voluntarily learning how to change diapers for the tiny, fragile humans. Lisa was doing well, feeling strong, and overcome with maternal love, one of the greatest strengths a woman can have.

Laynah continued to help take care of the ranch, mainly the horses, but most of her time was spent helping her mother in anything she needed. She was throwing her whole self into it. She was rewarded by receiving a video call from Jake.

Thursday afternoon after her mother and siblings had been made comfortable and her father had to see to a few things on the ranch, Laynah had been sitting in the den folding laundry as her mom nursed the babies when her phone went off, telling her that she was receiving a call. She dashed upstairs to her laptop and accepted the call, her eyes automatically filling with tears.

"Jake," she cried.

"Hey Bugs," he said softly.

"Oh, Jake, are you okay? I've been waiting so long to hear from you."

"I'm good. Sorry, baby, it's been crazy out here. We go out on a mission, and finally get back and sometimes have been without sleep for like forty-eight hours, so we have to close our eyes. And then I wake up and think I'm gonna get to call you and we'll be called in to a special mission brief or information brief and we're told to eat, prep and go. But Bugs, don't think that I'm not thinking of you and missing you, because you are always on my mind. Getting back to you is my priority."

"I've missed you so much, Jake. But I don't want you to worry about me. Don't think about me when you're out on a mission. Concentrate on what you're doing. That will be the safest thing you can do. But, oh, Jake, I miss you. I love you."

"I love you too, Bugs. It's powerful, baby. This love I have for you." He smiled. "So, I hear you've had quite an experience."

She frowned. "What did you hear?"

"That your mom was in an accident and you now have two new siblings."

"How?"

"I got called in by my commander who'd received a message that my family had been through a life-threatening emergency. He then played me a video message from my father who explained how everything happened. So, can I

meet the little ones?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh! Yes, absolutely." She grabbed up her laptop and ran down the stairs. "Mom, it's Jake!"

"Oh my goodness, well, hello there, Jake. It's so nice to see you and hear your voice," Lisa said softly.

"Hey, Aunt Lisa. From what I heard, it's a miracle that I can see you and hear your voice. I'm so grateful you weren't badly hurt."

She smiled. "Me too."

"So, can I see the babies?"

"Of course."

Laynah set the laptop on the coffee table and picked up her tiny brother and held him close to the computer. "Jake, this is Jonathon Jones Stewart."

"Oh wow, look at how tiny. Wow. Hello there, little guy. Wow."

Laynah smiled at her husband's reaction to her baby brother. "Isn't he just the cutest?"

"He's definitely a precious bundle there, Laynah. Just think, one day you and I will have one of those precious bundles."

"I know," she said softly. "Being here, helping my mom, it makes me want a baby really bad."

He smiled. "So, where's your new sister?"

Laynah handed little Jonny to her mother and lifted her tiny sister up and held her in front of the camera. "Say hello to Jake," she said softly against the tiny face. "This little girl is Lachlyn."

"Lachlyn? Cute name. Oh wow, she's even smaller than little Jonathon."

"Well, she's only about thirteen ounces smaller, but when you're less than five pounds, that's a lot. But I can tell that this sweet girl is already starting to gain some weight."

"She's beautiful, but, it looks like her hair is dark. That's strange."

Laynah smiled. "I know, right? Mom's a red-head, Dad's hair is blond. But Grandma Pat's hair is dark and Grandpa Joe says that his father's hair was dark brown. So I guess the gene is in there somewhere."

"Well, anyway, she's got a head full of hair doesn't she? And so does Jonathon, so that's cool. They are beautiful, Laynah. I'm happy for your parents. They have to be ecstatic."

"They are. And so am I. But right now, I'm so happy that I'm actually talking to you."

"Me too," he said.

"So, do you know when you'll have to go back out?"

He frowned. "Could be a few days. Could be a few minutes. Don't know."

"Any idea when the deployment will end?"

"You already know what I know, Bugs. I have a lot to do. There are a lot of missions to complete in order to clean up this area. It won't end any time soon. But you know that."

She nodded. "It was a dumb question. It's just my heart hoping that you might get home sooner than expected."

"Not a dumb question, babe. Stay strong. Focus on the present."

She nodded. "I'm really trying hard to do just that. So, tomorrow Gabe is fighting in the Mini-MART, that gives me something to focus on."

"Yeah, I wish I could watch. I'm gonna see if I can watch a live-stream, but if not, make sure you record it."

"I will. And the next day, young Eric is fighting in the Challenge."

"I know. Record that too. I, uh, I'll be busy."

She nodded, understanding what that meant.

He smiled. "So, take the computer back upstairs so that we can have a personal conversation."

She nodded.

"Bye, Aunt Lisa. Love you," Jake called.

"Love you too, Jake," Lisa yelled as Laynah ran upstairs with the computer.

They spoke for another thirty minutes, whispering hopes and dreams, exchanging endearments and promises of love being made. They prayed together, and Laynah felt so much better. Her cup had been filled.

✞✞✞

Still Thursday....about 5:30 p.m. Rose picked up her phone and glanced at the text. She smiled as she read a message from Jericho.

~~ Hey there. I just stopped into Joe's for a bite to eat. Are you in the area?

She was driving and rather than answer the text she swung her car into Joe's where she'd been headed in the first place.

She walked up to the bar and sat down next to Jericho Jones.

He turned and smiled at her. "Well, that was like, magic. Think of a beautiful girl and she appears at my side."

She laughed. "Don't wanna put a damper on your magical powers, but I was stopping by Joe's to pick up a chili dog for my mom."

"A chili dog?"

Rose nodded. "She's having cravings." She smiled. "So, anyway, hello there, Jericho Jones."

He grinned. "Hello yourself, RoseRose."

Josh Turner walked up. "Hey Rosie. Your order will be ready in about five," he said.

"Thanks, Mr. Turner," she said sweetly.

"Would you like to order now?" Josh asked Jericho.

Jericho looked at Rose. "You have time to share a meal with me?"

Rose shook her head. "Sorry, I really don't. I have to get the order for my mom cuz she's waiting, then I have to go by the Stewarts and see what they need, and of course, meet the babies, and then I have to go shop for my mother because she intends to have a bunch of food for tomorrow night while we watch Gabe on TV."

Jericho nodded and looked at Josh. "Well then, Josh, I guess I'll have a burger and some chili cheese fries, and another one of these," he said, lifting his beer.

She smiled. "Jericho, would you think it's too forward of me to invite you

to the house to watch Gabe fight tomorrow?"

He smiled and took a moment to gaze at her lovely face. "Well, Rose, I'm pretty darn sure that there's nothing you could do or say that I would consider to be too forward."

She snickered at that, because she was pretty sure there was.

He reached over and touched a lock of her blond hair, then let it slide between his thumb and forefinger. She looked up into his eyes. He sighed. This girl was beautiful.

"So, what's the answer?" she said.

"Well, I'm thinking about it. Will your whole family be there?"

"Everyone but Heather and Gabe himself of course."

"Who's Heather?"

She smiled. "My older sister."

"You have another sister?"

She nodded.

"Is she a twin too?"

"Nope."

"How much older is she?"

"One year."

"So, that means there are five girls, all within three years."

"Right. Very good."

He chuckled. "And then next in line is Gabe, and then Iris, and soon to be another set of twins."

"Correct."

"Nine kids."

"Right."

"Wow. And, uh, when is your mom due?"

"She isn't due until the second week of December, if she makes it full term, but there is a strong possibility that she won't."

He nodded.

"Well, are you coming or not? Or are you trying to avoid answering me? There is no wrong answer."

He smiled. "No, I'm not trying to avoid it. I'm just concerned. Violet will be there, which will probably mean CJ will be there. Is that right?"

She nodded. "Yes. So, big deal?"

He sighed. "I'm thinking I don't want to upset the applecart. It's obvious that CJ doesn't want to be around me."

Rose smiled. "I don't mind upsetting the applecart. As a matter of fact, most times, I love being the one upsetting the applecart."

He chuckled. "I bet that's the truth. And that's cool, as long as you remember that when the applecart gets upset, some apples could get bruised."

She grinned. "Oh, goody, then we bake us up some apple pie."

He nodded and sighed. "Okay, well then, I guess I'll accept your invitation and whatever will be, will be."

"Awesome." She looked him over. He was very handsome in a rugged sort

of way. Strong, athletic, strong jaw, pretty smile. "So," she began. "Tell me, why doesn't CJ want to be around you?"

"Well, something happened a long time ago, and like I said, if CJ wanted you to know, he would've told you already."

"What did you do to him?"

"I didn't do anything to him. I love him like a brother, but apparently, he doesn't feel the same way. I'd like to talk to him, clear the air, but I'm not sure what's goin' through his head."

"So, you knew each other when?"

"We grew up together in the same neighborhood up in Rome. We were neighbors. We were—best friends."

"When did you lose touch with each other?"

"Right after high school." He sighed.

"And you haven't heard from him since?"

He shook his head. "I had no idea where he went. I figured if he didn't want to be found, I wouldn't look. Though, I did try to find him a couple of times."

She looked him over. "Is this painful for you to talk about?"

"Yeah, I mean, a little."

"Okay, I'll shut up."

Josh put a brown bag on the counter in front of Rose. "There ya go, Rose. Go, team Gabe!" he said.

"Absolutely," Rose agreed with a laugh. She looked over at Jericho and noticed something. She reached out and touched his arm right where his sleeve ended, just above the elbow. "What happened here?"

He glanced down and rubbed his hand over the scar. "It's a burn." He lifted the sleeve so she could see.

Her eyes opened wide. The scar was large and extended up to his shoulder. "Wow, Jericho, that's some burn. What happened?"

He shrugged. "A house was on fire and I tried to save a woman and her little girl."

Rose blinked up at him. "Tried? As in, you weren't successful?"

He blew out a breath and nodded.

Rose sat silently a moment. She realized this was a very traumatic event in his life and decided to save her questions for another time. She sighed. "I'm, uh, I'm so sorry."

He nodded. "Thanks. It was a long time ago."

She smiled. "So, anyway, uh, I guess I'll see you tomorrow evening. Come for dinner. We'll eat about 6:00."

He smiled. "I'll see you then. Take care, RoseRose."

He watched her go. The pull was strong.

✝✝✝

November 7th, Thursday Evening

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

After dinner Gabe had a short session with Grandmaster Kino, the younger one. It was funny to Gabe, because Ricky Kino was so much like his father that

Gabe could almost forget that they were two different people. Like the elder Grandmaster Kino, Ricky's spirit was strong, powerful, calm, loving, compassionate. The only difference was the fact that Ricky Kino was Taylor's father, making Gabe a little bit more reserved around him.

When Gabe was excused from the counseling session, he went in search of Taylor. He had a feeling where she'd be and when he looked out on the back deck, he saw her. She was sitting on the steps that led out to the beach. He smiled because that was where she'd been last spring, at her grandfather's house, the evening before the Mini-MART and he was about to do the same thing he'd done then.

He went outside and walked down a few steps past her and turned. She stood and smiled at him. He smiled back. "I don't have a lot of time before I have to be in bed, so I'd better say this fast," he said, repeating what he'd said last spring.

She giggled.

"May I have a kiss for luck?"

She moved forward, put her arms up around his neck. He lowered his head and kissed her deeply. He lifted her and she wrapped her legs around his waist. His testosterone surged.

After several long kisses, he pulled back, staring into her eyes.

"What are you thinking about?" Taylor asked.

He sighed. "I'm thinking of making sure I take this feeling, this power that I feel right now, and use it tomorrow. I'm not sure you'd understand what I'm talking about."

She laughed. "You're talking about using your sex drive to fight better."

He chuckled. "Sometimes you seem so innocent, and sometimes you seem very knowledgeable."

"I've been training in the martial arts since I was a tiny kid. There's certain things I know, though I don't actually remember when I learned them. But I know I've overheard my mom and dad talk about it. My brother too. So, Gabe Tanner, you focus on whatever you need to focus on, and you fight hard tomorrow."

"I will. I can't let your family down, since this time I'm representing them against a different style altogether."

"It doesn't matter, win or lose. As long as you give it your all, you won't let them down."

He laughed. "Yep, you are a Kino."

"What's your schedule tomorrow?"

"Well, I can sleep until I wake up. I can eat a good high-carb breakfast. I'm gonna watch some films of my opponent, get some instruction, and eat a light lunch. And I think we're leaving the house by 2:00."

She ran her hands over his chest. "Just so you know, Gabe, I'm proud of you. I'm proud to be your girlfriend. I'm grateful to be loved by you and I have complete faith in you."

He cupped her face. "Thanks, Tay." He gave her a soft kiss.

She smiled sweetly. “You’re welcome. Now go inside and get some rest.”

“I won’t be able to rest if you’re not inside too.”

She nodded and held out her hand. “Then let’s go.”

✞✞✞

In the den, Bree, Ricky, young Eric, Jordan, Desi and Alec sat around talking about Gabe’s tournament. Ricky explained how the first Mini-MART came to be when they discovered how good Gabe was when he attended one of their classes and how well he did at a little class sparring competition. They thought it would merely be fun, a little entertainment while Gabe was in town. But it turned out to be immensely popular.

“It was popular because Gabe is special,” young Eric put in.

Bree nodded. “Yeah, I agree, so, continue to put young, good-lookin’ kids in the competition and three or four times a year, we can pull in big bucks for Gabe’s foundation and Angel’s foundation and Jeffy’s foundation. We will be able to help so many people.”

Ricky smiled. “Oh yeah, that would fly. We could write, ‘only good lookin’ kids need apply,’ on the registration forms.”

“Well, maybe good lookin’ is not exactly the right choice of words. Still, they have to be filled with light, and be honorable. They have to be good role models. They can’t be just some mean black-belt punk who registered to compete because he wants to show how big and bad he is. It has to be done with integrity,” Bree replied.

Ricky nodded. “I agree. Kids with integrity and light, who are honest and hardworking, and honorable.”

“Well,” Alec began, “Gabe is certainly all that. He’s a really good guy and he’s inspiring.”

“I agree,” Desi said. “But I also agree with Mrs. Kino. Gabe is really hot, and when you add that to all the other things he is, the Mini-MART will always be a hit.”

“I agree with you,” Jordan suddenly said to Desi. “You’re right about how Gabe looks. And if we’re honest, every young girl in the country who saw him was instantly attracted to him. But maybe it’s not just because he’s cute. Maybe because he’s all those other things, it makes him more attractive. Maybe that light he has is what helps to make him so attractive, so hot.”

“I think I’m gettin’ jealous here,” young Eric said.

Jordan laughed and snuggled up close to his side on the sofa. “Aww, Three, you have nothing to be jealous of. You’re about as hot as a guy can get.”

Ricky rolled his eyes.

Alec looked down when his phone buzzed. He looked at the number and his face went pale. He rose. “I, uh, need to take this,” he said and quickly walked out of the room.

“Maybe I should go with him,” Desi said as she started to rise.

“No, give him some privacy, Desi,” Ricky said kindly. “He needs to do this alone.”

“Why? Do you know who was on the phone?” Desi asked.

"I'm pretty sure who it was by the look on his face."

"Who?"

Bree smiled kindly. "His mother."

Desi's mouth opened in surprise. "Really?"

Alec headed up the stairs and went to his room. "Hello?"

"Alec, is that you?"

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"Mom, how did you get this number?"

"Mrs. Kino gave it to me."

"You spoke with Mrs. Kino? When?"

"When she came to see me last week."

"Oh." He swallowed. "Oh, well, okay, so, why are you calling?"

"Sweetheart, Mrs. Kino told me all about how things have been for you. How hard it's been."

"Well, I'm okay now, so you don't have to worry."

"Alec, I know you're okay now, and I know it's thanks to the Kinos. They seem like really nice people."

"They're the best."

"Well, not only did Mrs. Kino tell me about you, she told me about me."

"I don't think I understand."

"She pointed out to me how wrong I've been and how I should've helped you and Desi."

He sighed. "Oookay." He wasn't sure what to say about that.

"The thing is, Alec, she was absolutely right. I was so worried about your future, I forgot about being a decent human being. I thought somehow Desi would be okay, her parents would deal with her and you could go to school and make something of yourself. I thought if I was hard enough, tough enough on you, that you would capitulate. But you didn't."

"And I still won't," he said firmly.

"I understand. I really do. I mean, that much is obvious. You are gonna stick to your guns, you are gonna stay with Desi and be a father to your child. But the reason for this phone call is to not only tell you that I understand that, but to apologize. I made a mistake. Mistakes. Plural. Huge mistakes. And I'm sorry, Alec. I'm really sorry and I don't know if you can forgive me. I don't blame you if you can't. I understand that too. I also don't know how I can make this up to you." She stopped talking for a moment and when he didn't say anything, she went on. "I'd like to try to make it up to you, though. I know I hurt you. And Desi."

"You really did, Mom."

She sniffed. "I know that now. I'm so sorry. Oh, Alec, I keep remembering all the time you and I spent together—doing your homework together, or playing catch in the backyard together, and celebrating our little Christmas together, just the two of us. I did the best I could without your father, and Alec, I was so proud of you. You didn't let the fact that you didn't have a father

around hold you back. You studied hard. You were bright and had so many friends. I mean, senior class president, that's a big deal, and when you achieved that, I knew that meant you were gonna go far in life. I know some of that was because you learned how to adjust, and how to handle people. You learned that, but I didn't learn that. I didn't learn how to adjust and when your circumstances changed, when Desi got pregnant, all I could think about was everything you'd worked for was gonna go down the drain."

"Desi didn't just get pregnant, Mom. I got her pregnant and I'm sorry for that. I messed up. I know that. We didn't plan it. It was prom night and it was only the one time. But it happened. And I panicked and I didn't know what to do. But all I knew was, I was not gonna abandon her and her child like my father abandoned you and me. I don't know if Dad loved you. But I do know that I love Desi. I love her and I'm gonna marry her."

"Yes, Mrs. Kino told me that too. She told me your plans, and how things are gonna work out for you and I'm truly happy for you, Alec. I'm grateful that the Kinos stepped in and have taken you under their wings. And though I realize you don't need me or my help anymore, I'd, um, well, I'd like to help in some way. I mean, with your wedding and all. Or with anything. I'll do anything you want."

"Well, you're wrong about that, Mom. I do still need you. And I'd like you to be at the wedding."

She started to cry. "You would?"

"Yes, Mom. I would. And if I've learned anything from the Kinos it's that I can't harbor anger or hatred in my heart and so I forgive you, Mom."

"Oh, Alec..." she said as she cried harder.

"Okay, Mom, please don't cry. It's all gonna be okay. I mean, really. Desi and I are gonna get married, we have a home to move into, I have a job, and transportation and I'm gonna go to school next year, and I'm gonna take care of my family. So don't cry."

"I'm just crying because I've missed my little boy so much, and I thought I'd never have you in my life again. I thought I'd made it so that you would never come back."

"Okay, I get it. But listen, Mom, you said a few minutes ago you'd like to help me in some way, did you mean that?"

"Yes, of course," she said as she sniffed away her tears.

"Well, there are a few things you can do. But they're not easy things."

"Okay. Tell me and I'll give it my all."

He cleared his throat. "You can talk to Desi, Mom, and maybe, apologize to her, like, in person. I can bring her to the house and you can talk to her."

"Yes, Alec, I can do that. Is she, I mean, is she really upset with me? Or, I guess I want to know if she's angry?"

"No, Mom, Desi doesn't get angry. She is the sweetest person you could ever know. Sweet and kind and loving. And she knows how much it means to me to have you in my life and that means she knows it's important to me for you and her to be on good terms."

"When will you bring her then?"

"I can bring her after church this coming Sunday."

"You're going to church?"

"Yes. I'm starting to find God. I'm beginning to see that He's real, and it helps me so much and makes me feel happy and helps me to see everything from a different point of view."

"That's wonderful, Alec."

"Yeah, it really is. So, Mom, I'll see you Sunday about noon," he said.

"Okay, but you said there were a few things I could do for you. What else?"

"Well, it's a hard one, and it will have to be done soon, because Desi and I want to get married a week from this Saturday."

"Okay, so, what do you need me to do?"

"Go and speak to Desi's parents and see if you can get them to call her."

"Oh! Well, that is a hard one."

"I know it's scary. Desi's sister called her last Sunday. She said that Mr. Kino had come by to speak to the family and that her mother and father had a huge fight after that. Desi wants so badly to have her family at the wedding. Her father may not want to walk her down the aisle, and Mr. Kino would do that if he has to. But I thought, maybe if they see that you admit that you made mistakes, maybe they could do the same thing. From what her sister says, it's Mr. Copeland that's being so stubborn. Her mother is ready to support Destiny in any way she can."

"What if he won't listen to me?"

"Well, then at least we can say we tried. Charity, that's Desi's sister, she said that Mr. Kino even told them that our baby is a boy, hoping that would make a difference to Mr. Copeland, and she thought just maybe it did, so you could play that up."

"It's a boy?"

"Oh, you didn't know?"

"No. A boy. A grandson. Oh Alec, how wonderful is that!"

Alec's eyes filled at the sound of his mother being excited over the baby. He'd longed for this moment. "It's pretty exciting, Mom. I'm gonna have a son and I couldn't be happier about that. The only thing now that could make things any better is to have Desi's family on board."

"I'm gonna hang up, Alec, and call them right now before it gets too late. I'm gonna see if they'll meet with me tomorrow."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Thank you, Alec. Thanks for forgiving your dumb mom so easily."

"You're not dumb. And we all make mistakes. I know that firsthand. Thanks for calling, Mom. You've made my night and I can't wait to tell Desi."

"Alec," Ivana said softly. "I love you."

He sniffed. "Love you too, Mom."

He ended the call and headed back down the stairs to report to Desi and the Kinos the miracle that had just taken place.

✝✝✝

November 8th, Friday Morning

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Shelley smiled. She'd been lying there waiting, dozing in and out, her eyes closed, waiting for her husband. It seemed he'd been in the shower a long time. Finally, though, she felt his presence, felt the bed move as he leaned over her and smiled as the drop of water landed on her cheek. She opened her eyes.

"You gonna sleep all day?" he teased.

Shelley sighed. "You're late. I was beginning to worry. You were in the shower a long time."

"Sorry. I was kind of talking to God. It felt like I was a kid again, standing under a waterfall and I had the strangest feeling that I was transported back to Kauai. It felt so good to be back there. Comforting. And I didn't want it to end, the feeling, I mean, that I was standing on holy ground, communing with God."

Shelley placed her hand on the side of Eric's face. "Maybe we should take a trip there. Introduce the kids to the rest of your family and take a hike back to the place."

He closed his eyes a second, then opened them. "I think that is a wonderful idea. It's calling to me. Let's plan that, maybe after the first of the year."

"I'll look forward to it," Shelley said, and then frowned. "As long as you're not thinking that God is calling you home, I mean, *home*-home."

Eric smiled. "Naw, I think I have at least fifteen years."

"You mean, like Hezekiah?"

"Right. Unless it's time for all of us to rise up to meet Jesus."

"Can't be too soon for me," Shelley said with a smile.

Eric frowned. "Why, sweetheart? Are you suffering?"

"Oh, no, I'm wonderful. I have five new babies, I have my husband, I have my giant family. I'm already in heaven. I just don't want to be like Lot's wife. You know, looking back at my earthly life and longing for the things here, when being present with God is where I want to be with my loved ones."

Eric lowered his head and touched his lips to Shelley's, then smiled. "I love you, Shelley girl. Your heart is so full of love and you're so strong. You don't even know how much I depend on you. Thank you for taking such good care of our family."

"It's my extreme pleasure."

"Do you think the kids are still asleep?"

She listened. "I don't hear anything. What time is it?"

"It's just after six."

"They won't be up for another thirty minutes or so," Shelley replied. "Why?"

"Because I'm about to make love to my wife. Whaddya think about that?"

"Again. It's my extreme pleasure."

✝✝✝

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind and compassionate to one another,
forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Chapter Eighteen

November 8th, Friday Afternoon
Rosewood Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California

Gabe looked around the back area of the *Rosewood Sports Arena*. It was the same as it had been way back last spring, but it felt different. So much had happened since that time. His life had changed completely. The limo pulled up and the family stepped out.

Not everyone in the family rode in the limo. Young Eric and Jordan brought their own car, as did Desi and Alec. However, they all unloaded in the back special entrance and their cars were parked by their assigned agents. Security was tight.

Young Eric and Jordan's car was filled with large boxes of goodies, and he unloaded them onto rolling carts to take them to concessions.

As Gabe, Taylor, Ricky and Bree made their way inside, a second limo pulled up with Grandmaster Kino, Shelley, five kids, Bella and Em, and Jeffy and Cam. Logan and Melody pulled up behind them, unloaded, and immediately went to help with the five Kino children, because Melody reminded Logan more than once that she was working today.

Next to pull up were Joey, Breez and their kids, Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger, and right behind them, Jeff and Mickey Davis and their boys, Daniel and Jeremy.

Already at the arena were Jason and Angel, Justin and Lori, and Kimmie and Jensen. Once more, JoJo had an away game and his father went to Colorado to support him.

Most of those who'd unloaded in the back headed to the room designated for prayer before the match. They would pray together and then Gabe's people would all make their way to the arena and take their seats in the VIP section. Some of their people would be arriving later, through the front doors and would also be seated in the VIP section; people like Melody's family, Jordan's family, and a few of the masters who helped in the training. Also due to arrive were Toby Nash, Caroline and their daughter Grace. Unfortunately, their son Brody was unable to get away.

Gabe looked around as he entered and sure enough, Isla August was headed straight to him. This time, Gabe smiled at her warmly as she approached.

"And here he is, everyone, the man of the hour! Hello, Gabriel Tanner," Isla greeted brightly.

Gabe nodded. "Hey everyone."

"How're ya feelin' today?"

"Feel good."

"Ready to win?"

"I'll give it my best shot," he said. The Kinos had a hard-and-fast rule that you never predicted the outcome of a fight, so he was careful to sound humble. However, Gabe was feeling pretty strong and pretty confident.

"Well, you have a lot of people in your corner," Isla said. "Like—millions!"

Gabe smiled. "Thanks everyone. I'll do my best to make you proud. I'm just grateful that I was able to recover from my injuries a few months ago and be strong enough to compete. God is good."

"Yes He is! Okay, well, we'll let you go do whatever you do before a fight. Get your game face on and all that. Go Team Gabe!"

Gabe smiled and waved. "Thanks everyone."

Isla headed behind him. He heard her say the name of his opponent, Tony Omori, and Gabe figured the guy had just arrived. He turned to see, but there were too many people in the large corridor behind him, including Mr. Kino.

"Straight to the locker room," Ricky said firmly.

Gabe nodded. "Yes, sir." He turned and headed to his assigned room.

Meanwhile, young Eric had Jewell's concession items in several large boxes on a couple of rolling carts. He nodded at Logan. "How about a hand?"

"Mind if I tag along?" Jordan asked. "I know I'm a hassle 'cause I slow you down, but do you mind? Mom's gonna ask me how her stuff was displayed and I'd like to check it out first-hand."

Young Eric smiled at her. "I don't mind, babe. Whatever you want, you get— within reason," he added with a smile.

They went through the back hallways to an elevator and went upstairs and then around to the front concession area. The concession manager clapped her hands together when they arrived. "I can't wait to see the things you're bringing. I was told to save a prime location for them," she exclaimed.

Jordan watched while the manager bossed Eric and Logan around, telling them where to place the extras in the coolers and where to place the ones for immediate sale. It was obvious the manager had no idea she was bossing around a soon-to-be movie star and a soon-to-be Grammy winner—or so Jordan was sure. Jordan eyed the display, took pictures and sent them immediately to her mother. By the time they were finished the arena was already filling up. One of the vendors was already heading out with a tray filled with ice cold drinks.

Eric, Jordan and Logan were just heading across the lobby area when they heard yelling and a giant crash. They turned to see a couple of kids, maybe about eleven or twelve years old, laughing and running away from the vendor. Eric thought about going after the kids, but instead decided the vendor who'd just been crashed into needed help.

"Stay here," he said to Jordan as he left her by the steps that led down to floor level. He and Logan both went to help the vendor who was an older man. Eric knelt down beside him. "You okay?"

The man nodded. "Darn kids. It's not the first time they've done this."

Young Eric sighed as he took one arm and Logan took the other and they pulled the man to his feet. "How many other times?" Eric asked.

"Too many to count. I think they do it on purpose."

"How do a couple of kids get here to the arena and then get in on a regular basis? I mean, it's not cheap."

"I think they come with their parents, some big wig season ticket holders, and those kids are just spoiled little rich kids who get off on causing trouble. I seen them grab a wallet from a man once, but nobody would believe me."

Young Eric shook his head. "So, sir, may I ask your name?"

"Jeremiah Cobb, young man."

Young Eric smiled. "Well, Mr. Cobb, I'm Eric and this is my brother, Logan. How long you been workin' here?"

"Oh, I'd say goin' on 'bout twenty years now. I started workin' here when I retired from driving a school bus."

"Twenty years is a long time. How long did you drive the school bus?"

"Twenty-five years."

The three looked up when a fortyish man came around the corner, a frown on his face. "Again, Jeremiah?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you can't keep your balance, maybe we need to get someone else."

"Oh, I can keep my balance alright, if those kids would stay away."

"How come I never see these kids you keep talking about?"

Eric's eyes narrowed. "You don't believe him?"

"I don't think this is any of your business."

"I do. All you have to do is get security to pull the security camera videos and you'll see the kids."

The man picked up his walkie-talkie from his hip. "Stacey, we need immediate clean-up, mops and cones at the front lobby near the blue concessions." He looked back up at the two young men. "I don't really have time for this." He then turned back to Jeremiah. "Go fill your tray again and I'm gonna have to dock you for the cost of those drinks."

"Seriously?" Logan said.

The man looked up. "Thank you for your assistance, but our policies are not up for discussion right now."

"Well, they will be," young Eric promised. He pulled out his wallet and removed two hundred dollars and handed them to Jeremiah. "Here's your tip. And thanks for the information, Jeremiah. Can I get your number?" Young Eric pulled out his phone and punched in Jeremiah's information. He smiled at the man. "And here's my card. If you need anything, give me a call."

Jeremiah looked down at the name and back up quickly, his eyes going wide. "Oh, I'm sorry I didn't recognize you."

Eric smiled. "No problem. I'm just glad I recognized a good man when I saw one."

The supervisor looked closer at the two young men. "So, who are you?"

"Eric Kino the Third, and my cousin, Logan Adams. And we'll be seeing *you* soon." They all turned at the sound of more yelling, but this time it was a voice they recognized— Jordan.

"Let go, you little brat! Ohhh," she yelled as she went down.

They whirled and headed toward the stairs. One of the kids had grabbed one of Jordan's crutches and yanked hard. He took off with the crutch as Jordan fell face down and slid down several steps.

Eric and Logan ran to her, and pulled her up to sit on the stairs.

"Baby, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay, now go get that little brat and get my crutch and bring him to me so I can beat his butt."

Eric nodded. "Logan, you go that way, I'll go this way, Jordan, you call Jason and tell him we need some security to help with a couple of delinquents."

Logan took off after the kid that went to the right. Eric took off after the kid that headed down the stairs and into the arena. He found the kid pretending to hobble along the aisle on one crutch. Eric ran toward him. The kid looked up and laughed, then picked up the crutch and swung it at Eric as he approached, narrowly missing a woman sitting in the front row of the upper deck.

Young Eric grabbed the crutch and jerked it from the kid's hands and threw it down and lunged for the kid. All this got the attention of the crowd. The kid jumped up onto the narrow ledge that was the boundary for the upper deck and ran along it as the crowd gasped and held their breath. Young Eric followed suit, jumping up and running. He caught up to the kid in only a few strides. As he neared, the kid started waving his arms as he began to lose his balance. Eric jumped forward, tackling the kid over into the aisle and saving him from a twenty-foot drop.

The crowd actually applauded, but that was short-lived. The kid started screaming. "Help, help, he's trying to kidnap me."

At the call for help, a couple of men came running from their seats. Eric held out his hand. "He's lying. He just assaulted an old man and stole that crutch from a girl in a cast and made her fall down the stairs. Now back off."

"Hey," a woman said loudly. "That's Eric Kino."

The men looked him over and realized it most certainly was Eric Kino. "Hey, Eric, so, you want me to call security?" one said.

"Thanks, but they've already been called. But you *can* hand me that crutch over there."

The man retrieved the crutch. "I'll carry it for you. Where you headed?"

"Out here to check on my girl."

The kid was kicking and screaming and doing his best to make a scene but Eric gave him a hard shake. The boy turned and tried to fight. So Eric picked him up and secured him under his arm and carried him out.

At the same time, agents arrived in the front lobby.

"Jordan?"

She turned and looked up at the voice. "Agent Trout!"

"You okay?"

"I think so. Scraped up my arm. Eric went to grab the kid."

They both looked up as a man carrying Jordan's crutch came up the stairs followed by young Eric with a kid tucked under his arm. They then turned at another ruckus coming from the right and Logan appeared, his hand clamped around the arm of the other kid.

A couple of agents moved forward to take charge of the two kids.

"Be careful, they're tricky," Logan warned.

"Let's move this back into the security conference room," Senior Agent Trout said.

They all went to the room and sat the boys down.

"Pull up the video from the lobby cameras," young Eric said. "You'll see they assaulted one of the vendors and then Jordan."

They pulled up the video and watched. They were trying to get the boys to tell them their parents' names when there was another ruckus outside the room.

"I'm telling you right now, you'd better open that door and let me see my son," a woman was yelling.

Trout placed his phone down to record audio and spoke softly. "Let her in."

Young Eric watched the classic "my kid can do no wrong" scenario unfold. He sighed. He was in a hurry to get back to Gabe's side. "Ma'am, *your* son assaulted two people. I saw it happen both times and it's on video."

"I hardly call a little prank assault," she argued.

"It's not a little prank. He jerked my girl's crutch away from her and she fell on the stairs. She could've taken a bigger tumble and broken her neck. In other words, it could've killed her and then your little delinquent would go to jail. So you need to pull back on the reins now before it's too late."

"I don't know who you think you are, but my husband and I practically own this place. We've been coming here to support all the events for years and we're Golden Season ticket holders and we're on the board that keeps this place running."

Eric shook his head. "That means nothing to me."

"Oh yeah? Well, it should mean something because I could have you thrown out of here."

The entire room went silent. It was Jordan's small snicker that made everyone else laugh.

"I certainly don't see what's so funny," the woman said.

"What they're all laughing at is the fact that *I actually* own this place, or my family does, and it looks like we need to make some changes on who gets on the board."

"I don't believe you. You're just a kid."

"I know, right?" he said with a grin, making everyone laugh again.

"Wh...who are you?"

"Ma'am, this is Eric Kino the third," Agent Trout said, taking a great deal of pleasure in saying it.

Her face went blank. "Oh."

Young Eric looked up at Agent Trout. “I really need to get back to Gabe.” He then looked at Jordan. “Do you want to press charges?”

Jordan smiled. “What’s your opinion on that?”

“Well, I think if the parents acknowledge the fault of their kids and the kids apologize, and the parents apologize, then you might let it slide. But if not, yeah, I think you should press charges because it would be the only way to show these people that their kids are on the verge of making some huge life-altering choices. But that’s just my opinion. And really, we need to ask Mr. Cobb if he wants to press charges.”

“Do I have to decide right now?” Jordan asked.

“No. You have some time,” Trout said. “We will, however, begin right away to collect all the witness information and evidence and turn it over to the police. If you want to wait and think about it, that will give the perps time to also think about it and maybe come up with an apology and a plan of action or an offer to make restitution for the damages.”

Agent Trout looked at the woman. “Is your husband here?”

“Yes.”

“Are these both your children?”

“No.” She pointed at the one Logan had caught. “He’s a neighbor and my son’s best friend.”

“May I get your name, please?”

“My name is Victoria Dupree and my husband’s name is Kenneth Dupree.”

“Well, Mrs. Dupree, you might want to get your husband in here, because depending on what Mr. Cobb says, we may release the boys to your custody, but you will not be able to stay for the event.”

She gasped. “How dare you! We’ve paid to see this.”

“You paid for the privilege to see the event. You lost the privilege when you allowed your child and his friend to commit crimes on the premises. Regardless of whether they press charges, your family is going to be escorted from the premises.” He turned to Jordan. “So, Miss Brooks, would you like to take some time to think about it and maybe discuss it with your lawyer?”

Jordan smiled at the formality. “Yes, I’d like time to think about it,” Jordan said finally.

“I want to know your name,” the woman said.

She smiled. “I’m Jordan Brooks.” She looked at Agent Trout. “It’s so good to see you, Agent Trout, but we do need to get back downstairs.”

Trout nodded. “Escort them please,” he said to two of the agents present. “Oh, and Eric, see to Jordan’s arm. It’s bleeding.”

Young Eric looked down at her arm, frowned, and then looked back at the boys. Though he really didn’t feel any animosity toward the kids, he thought a little fear of consequences was in order. “Ya know, I really hope she decides to press charges.”

Logan, Jordan and young Eric took their leave. Young Eric dropped Jordan off at the prayer room and then he and Logan went to Gabe’s locker room. They stepped inside, and Gabe and the others gave them an ovation—everyone

except Eric's father and grandfather.

Young Eric looked around at the faces. Gabe, Uncle Joey, Jason, Justin, Uncle Cam, and Jeff Davis, were all smiling.

"What?" young Eric asked.

Cam held up his phone. "You were being videoed."

"Oh."

"That was some aerial act, son," Ricky said, his tone making it clear that he wasn't praising him, but rather, calling him out.

Young Eric looked at him and lowered his head. "Sorry. It was instinctive. He jumped up there, I followed."

"You know, you have obligations tomorrow."

"I understand, though Dad, I really feel like I wasn't in any danger."

"I get that, but you have to think about the fact that there is a great deal of responsibility resting on your shoulders right now. It's not just about you being able to fight and represent our family in the Kino Challenge. There are a lot of moving parts to putting this event together and a lot of people are depending on this event being successful. We have contracts. Remember signing that? Jumping up on that precipice was a breach."

Young Eric nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm uh, I'm sorry, Dad. But still, I have to say, my balance was perfect."

Eric Sr. nodded. "Yep, and even Nik Wallenda would say that perfect balance is perfect, until it's not."

"So, is Jordan okay?" Justin asked.

"Yes, sir. Aunt Jeffy is checking her over right now. Jordan's arm got scraped up when she tried to stop her fall, but Aunt Jeffy doesn't think she reinjured her foot."

"So, I heard the mother of one of the kids tried to have you thrown out of the complex," Gabe said with a grin.

Young Eric smiled. "She spoke about it briefly."

"And then?" Jeff asked.

"And then he told her who he was," Logan said. "And it was awesome, I mean, the look on her face."

The group chuckled.

"Yeah," young Eric began. "We have some cleanup we need to do on this place, both in management and on the board of directors, but I'll tell you all about it later. Right now, we need to concentrate on Gabe. He's our focus."

"Then quit trying to steal his thunder," Cam joked.

Grandmaster Kino spoke quietly. "Gabe, now that you've had some time to digest, let's start your first warm-up."

Gabe *nodded* and stood, twisted back and forth several times, folded in half and wrapped his arms around his legs and then reached high, stretching and breathing deeply. He nodded. "Let's do it."

✝✝✝

Still Friday... Tanner Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jericho Jones drove through the large, open iron gate at the end of the

Tanners' driveway. It was a long driveway that ran past all eight cottages that belonged to the *Pine Forest Country Inn* next door. The Tanner home was beautifully landscaped with a lovely lawn, numerous flower beds, hedges, plants and hardscapes. Right now, there were some outside decorations of hay bales and pumpkins and scarecrows. The house itself was large, white with dark-gray trim, and he'd heard that Mr. Tanner had built it himself with the help of his neighbors. Very cool.

Jericho parked to the left of the house, beside the driveway in front of a large garage, then headed up the walk and then up the steps of a giant, wraparound porch. He started to ring the bell but the door opened before he could. Rose stood there smiling.

"Hey, and welcome to our home," she said brightly.

"Thank you, and your home is really nice."

"Thank you. Come in," she said as she stood back to let him enter.

He stepped inside and the aromas of dinner being cooked hit him square in the face. "Good grief, it smells good in here."

Rose giggled. "Are you hungry?"

"I am now." He handed her the fall flowers he'd grabbed at the grocery store. "These are for you."

"Aww, thank you. How sweet."

"Yep, that's what they all say about me."

"I bet," she said with a laugh. "Let me put these in a vase. Come on in to the kitchen and meet my mom."

Jericho followed her into the kitchen, which was in the front-left area of the house. A very pregnant and very beautiful woman with blond hair and big blue eyes turned and smiled at him. He was stunned by her. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but looking at Rose, and all of her sisters that he'd met, he should've known that she would be just as beautiful.

"Close your mouth," Rose whispered.

He did. "Oh, um, sorry. I'm just amazed that your mom is every bit as beautiful as you."

"Wow, that's a triple word score," Daisy said as she turned from the sink.

Jericho chuckled. "Triple? You mean double?"

"No, I mean triple. My mom, Rose, and Violet, cuz when you compliment Rose, you compliment Violet, too."

Lizzy moved forward holding out her hand. "Thank you for the compliment, Jericho. It's nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you and I'm grateful that you were there to help Lisa last week."

"I am grateful too," he said humbly. "Um, this is for you." He held out a brown paper bag.

Lizzy opened the bag and peeked inside and then looked up with a grin. "Jericho Jones, thank you so much. You just scored more points, big time."

"What is it?" Rose asked.

Lizzy giggled. "It's a couple of chili dogs from Joe's," she said as she rolled the top of the bag closed and stuck it in the refrigerator.

Rose smiled. "Wow, you're good."

He shrugged with a grin.

Rose motioned toward a high cupboard. "Jericho, would you mind opening that cabinet for me and grabbing that large vase?"

He reached above her head. "This one?"

She shook her head. "No, the clear one. Yep. That's it. Thanks."

He smiled. "So, just curious, what would you have done if I wasn't here?"

She pointed toward a small aluminum step ladder beside the refrigerator.

"Hello, Jericho, and welcome to heaven."

He turned at the deep voice and smiled. "Nice to see you, Mr. Tanner. And thank you. It does seem to be a little slice of heaven."

The men shook hands.

"So, you ready to see your son kick some butt?" Jericho asked.

Keegan nodded. "Gabe kickin' butt is always a good time."

"I know that's right," Rose added as she cut stems and arranged the flowers.

Jericho watched Mr. Tanner walk over to the stove where Mrs. Tanner was working a potato masher through a large pot of potatoes. He kissed her cheek and took the masher from her.

"Go sit down, sweetheart, and let me do that."

She looked up into his eyes, sighed and nodded and went to sit at the large kitchen table.

Lily came rushing in through the kitchen door. "Hey everyone. Sorry I'm late, but Jodi really needed help at the Inn and guess what? She's gonna have to hire a new kitchen manager because Greta broke her leg when she fell off her horse this morning."

"Oh, dear, bless her heart," Lizzy said.

Lily nodded. "I know, right? But of course, Aunt Lisa will make sure she's taken care of." She smiled up at Jericho. "Hello again, Jericho."

He smiled. "Hello, Lily. It is Lily, right?"

Daisy laughed. "Yes. Good job."

"What needs to be done?" Lily asked.

"The gravy needs to be made and I need to add some butter and garlic to the green beans."

Lily started on the gravy. Daisy started on the green beans.

Jericho turned at the shriek of a child as Violet walked into the kitchen accompanied by CJ with Iris riding on his shoulders.

Jericho drew a deep breath. He glanced at Rose who smiled up at him. He guessed it was time for him to see if he could keep the applecart from spilling. He nodded at CJ.

CJ nodded back.

Violet smiled warmly. "Hello, Jericho. It's nice to see you again."

"You too, Violet." He then held his hand out to CJ. "CJ, good to see you."

CJ sighed and paused, while everyone held their breath. Finally, he extended his hand. "JJ."

Jericho looked up at the gorgeous little girl up on CJ's shoulders. "Hello

there, Iris," he said with a smile.

"Hi. I bemember you. You're a fireman."

Jericho nodded. "That's right. You're very smart."

"I know," she said matter-of-factly, making everyone chuckle. "Me and Violet and CJ been jumping in the leaves."

"Cool."

"Violet, CJ, and I," Lizzy corrected.

Iris laughed. "You didn't jump in the leaves, Mommy."

Lizzy laughed. "No, I didn't," she said as she stood. "Why don't you help me get the table set."

Rose carried the vase of flowers to the larger dining room table where they'd be eating and set them in the center. "Come on, Jericho, I'll show you around real quick before we eat."

Jericho followed her, glancing once more at CJ. He wished he could have time to speak with him, to find out what was going on in his head. But today was not the time or place. Still, he eventually intended to make that happen. Right now, a beautiful blonde was giving him a tour of her home and he rested his eyes on her. Not a hard thing to do at all.

Rose smiled at him. "This is the den where we'll watch the fight."

He looked around the large room. "Everything is so big."

Rose shrugged. "Well, we do have a big family, and when everyone is here, it gets pretty crowded. Dad is even talking about adding on, or building a guest house in the back."

"Oh wow, that would be a big project."

"Yeah, I asked him if he'd do it himself and he said he didn't have time and he'd hire a good contractor."

"So, that sounds like it's a done deal."

She nodded. "I think it is."

She took him out back to see the pool and the large yard where a lot of family ball games had been played. She took him downstairs to the workout room and another family room with a pool table and foosball table and ping pong table.

"You guys have a lot of fun stuff."

Rose smiled. "Yeah, but now that Gabe is gone, it's all just collecting dust. Gabe was like, the life of the party. So full of energy and light. He had like, a gazillion friends and they'd all come over and have giant competitions. And then they'd eat us out of house and home and make a huge mess in the kitchen and then rush to go help a neighbor or something. You couldn't stay mad at him. Mostly cuz he loves with his whole heart."

"Sounds like you miss him."

"I do. Terribly. I feel like some old mom who wants to go back in time because her children are all grown. Gabe is such a bright light, that when he's gone, it feels dark and gray."

He turned to her and touched her nose. "Well, RoseRose Anderson, I think YOU are a bright light."

She smiled. "Not hardly."

"Yes you are. When you walk in a room, it gets brighter. And you're powerful. You're like, I dunno, a force to be reckoned with, I guess." He looked into her eyes. "You're a light that I can't look away from. I'm like a moth to a flame."

"Oh, then you'd better be careful," she said with a laugh.

He shook his head. "I'm not afraid. I'm a firefighter," he joked. "You might challenge me, but you don't scare me. What you do is intrigue me. And besides all of that, you can melt me with just one of your smiles."

"Wow, I mean, those are some strong words."

"I know," he said with a sigh. "And the strange thing is, I don't usually say things like that. But you're different than any girl I've ever met. Your beauty, your strength, your faith—it's all very intriguing, and it makes me want to do things I've never done before."

Her eyes opened wide, but she didn't inquire what those things were. "Well, Jericho Jones, you intrigue me too."

He smiled. "Good. I'm glad to know it's not one-sided."

She looked away when her phone buzzed and pulled it out of her back jean pocket. "Well, hello there, Taylor Kino!"

✝✝✝

Rosewood Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California

Once Gabe had been through his pre-fight routine, he and his team, Grandmaster Kino, Ricky Kino, Eric Kino, Logan Adams, Cam Wallace, Jeff Davis, Joey Adams and Jason and Justin Lee made their way to the prayer room. They were all hugged and greeted by their spouses or girlfriends. They talked for a few minutes, allowing everyone to speak whatever words of encouragement they wanted to speak to Gabe.

Taylor raised her phone. "Hey Gabe, there's some people here that want to speak to you."

Gabe looked up at her phone and saw his family. "Kick butt!" "You go, boy!" "Work hard!" "Don't give up!" and "Give it your all!" were some of the things he heard yelled at him. He grinned, waved, bowed slightly, and gave them a thumbs-up. "I promise to do my best."

"We're about to pray," Ricky said to Gabe's family. "Stay on the call and you can participate."

"Awesome," they said.

"I wanna pray," Iris called out, making the group chuckle.

"Hush now, Iris," they heard someone say.

"No, let her pray," Grandmaster Kino said softly.

They stood in a circle and linked hands. They heard, "Okay, Iris, go ahead and say your prayer, sweetie, but this is not a prayer to bless the food. This is a prayer for Gabe. Go ahead, but talk loud so they can hear you on the phone."

"Okay," she said, trying to make her munchkin voice louder. "Dear Fawder, pwease bwess Gabe cuz I miss him and I wove him. Keep him safe, in Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," they all echoed.

"I pway too?" Angelina asked softly.

"Absolutely, baby girl," Grandmaster Kino replied. "Go ahead."

"Dear God, pwease bwess Gabe 'n I wove him too. Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," they all said again.

They heard a sniff and looked up to see Gabe wiping the moisture from his eyes with his thumb.

"Bruh, are you cryin'?" Logan asked, with a grin.

Gabe shrugged. "I mean, these two little girls just told God that they loved me. It kinda got to me."

The group laughed and young Eric rubbed the top of Gabe's head. "Ya know what, Gabe, I love you too, bro. If only because you recognized how special that was. You are so cool."

They all laughed again.

"Okay, it's my turn," Grandmaster Kino said with a smile. "Because I love him too." He prayed over the entire group, over the event, over the attendees and over Gabe. When he finished they were all ready.

The ladies, the children, Desi, and Alec all headed out to the arena, but Gabe grabbed Taylor and pulled her aside.

"One more for luck?" he asked.

She smiled. "You can have as many as you want."

He took her in his arms and kissed her thoroughly.

"Let's move it, Romeo," young Eric said.

Gabe laughed, released her, and watched everyone leave the room.

The crowd out in the arena got excited as the masses pointed, recognizing that Gabe's people were coming out to their seats.

The arena was full. Sports Networks were present and broadcasting live. Social media was buzzing and the Mini-MART was of course, trending. Teenage girls across the world held their breath, waiting for the moment that Gabe would make his appearance. So far, they and the rest of the audience had seen an amazing display of martial arts skill put on by three different groups. One of those groups was from Kino Martial Arts of Kansas City. Another was from Zander Zendo Ryu Martial Arts of Virginia, run by a former student of Grandmaster Kino. The third group was Yoon Taekwondo from Austin, Texas. All three groups put on extraordinary demonstrations of skill, discipline, and humor, and all of it was put to music to make it fast-paced and entertaining, and it was well done indeed.

The pre-tournament entertainment didn't stop there. Male and female gymnasts from several colleges gave floor-exercise demonstrations that were blowing people's minds. Their strength and skill were mesmerizing.

Now, everyone in the crowd heard a single, very loud, very strong, very beautiful female voice singing, coming from somewhere in the arena. Of course, the cameramen knew where to point their cameras and everyone looked up at the jumbotron as they watched the flash mob begin. The unmistakable opening words sung by a single voice rang out: *"I gotta feelin', tonight's*

gonna be a good night..."

Then a few more people joined in and they began walking down onto the arena floor. Suddenly there were ten more, and the song switched to *Don't Stop Believin'*, and more joined as the floor was filled with a hundred singers. Then the music switched again, the singers ran out toward the edge of the floor to make room for the huge group that came to take over the center of the floor. The new music was *Can't Stop the Feeling!* by Justin Timberlake and the singers who took over the middle of the floor were obviously also dancers. The people in the crowd were jumping up and down, clapping, and cheering. The entire spectacle was fun and thrilling, because flash mobs were just that.

When the song ended, the crowd thought it was over, but then they heard drums. The flash mob parted and a drumline from three different Los Angeles-area high schools, all in uniform, all very handsome, made their way onto the floor and gave a superb demonstration of their skills. At the very end, the opening notes of *Eye of the Tiger* came over the sound system, the drumline divided in two and raised their drumsticks in the air to portray a kind of arch of sabers. Finally, Tony Omori and his team from Williams Brothers Karate walked out beneath the drummers' arch.

The crowd stood and applauded for the fighter. He and his team walked through the arch and stopped beside the thirty-by-thirty-foot square ring with ropes. Omori lifted his arms in the air and hopped around a bit, nodding at the crowd as they applauded him.

Then, the crowd seemed to hold their breath for a few seconds as they waited, then jumped to their feet screaming, whistling, and yelling, as Gabe's team came in, walking in a single file line. Gabe was third from last, with Grandmaster Kino and Ricky Kino behind him. The roar of the crowd was deafening, so much so that the moms were having their children put their hands over their ears. Gabe's team lined up on the opposite side of the ring. Gabe looked up briefly and smiled and tapped his hand on his chest to show gratitude for the heartfelt welcome.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for the National Anthem," the announcer said.

The song was being sung by a young girl Gabe recognized. She was the fourteen-year-old powerhouse from *American Idol* last year. She didn't win, but she was still awesome. She held the mic to her lips and began to sing.

Gabe stood with his hand over his heart and looked up at the flag flying on the jumbotron. He glanced around to see if there were any military guys standing at attention and saluting. He spotted a few and smiled. It always made him feel good. Then he looked again and realized that the Ameritech Agents were also standing at attention and saluting and his heart soared.

The anthem ended and the announcer walked into the middle of the ring and began by welcoming everyone to the event. He then introduced the judges, timekeeper, scorekeeper, and referee.

"All proceeds from today's event will go to three different organizations: Dr. June Flower Kino's *Heal the World Foundation*, Angel Lee's *Angel*

Network Foundation that works with women and children in precarious situations, and last but not least, the *Gabe Tanner Foundation* that is working with our youth across the nation in various capacities. Let's give a hand to the people who run these foundations."

The announcer waited for the applause then went on.

"Ladies— and— gentlemen, I will now introduce tonight's competitors. First, for Team Tony, Sensei— Edward— Williams, Sensei— Aaron— Williams, trainers Jiro Takahashi, Sam Ito and Jay Ito. And, in the red trunks, at a height of five feet, eleven and a half inches, weighing in at 189 pounds, nineteen-year-old Tony—O—mori!" He stopped and waited for the applause to die down as Tony raised both his hands in the air, nodded his head and turned in a slow circle to acknowledge the entire crowd.

"And now for Team Gabe," he said, and had to wait a few seconds to hear himself speak. "Grandmaster—Eric—Kino, Grandmaster—Ricky—Kino, Master Eric Kino the Third, Master Joey Adams, Master Logan Adams, Trainers Master Jeff Davis, Master Cam Wallace, Master Jason Lee and Master Justin Lee. And, in the black trunks..."

The crowd was so loud he had to stop again. "In the black trunks, at the height of six feet, one inch, weighing in at 181 pounds, eighteen-year-old Gabe—Tanner!" Gabe stepped out, raised one hand in the air, smiled, and waved. He, too, turned in a slow circle.

Gabe then headed over to Tony's team and bowed to each of them while Tony did the same to Gabe's team. After that, Logan, young Eric, Justin, Jason, and Cam went to sit with their girls, while Ricky, Jeff, and Joey stayed ringside.

The fighters entered the ring and went to their corner.

Grandmaster Kino stood in front of Gabe and looked into his eyes. "Ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Focused?"

"Es, si."

"Opening move?"

Gabe spoke it automatically without having to think about it.

"Energy?"

"Good to go."

Grandmaster Kino nodded.

Gabe drew a deep breath. "Um, Grandmaster Kino, I just wanna say thank you. For training me. For working so hard with me. I'm honored that I can learn from you." He stepped back and then bowed slowly and deeply.

Grandmaster Kino bowed in return, then smiled, reached up, and mussed Gabe's hair.

Taylor smiled at the gesture, and there was a murmur from the crowd showing that they were intently watching every single thing Gabe did.

Jordan leaned over to Taylor. "That was so sweet."

"I know, right? I can't wait to ask Gabe exactly what he said."

On the large-screen TV in the Tanners' home, the announcer on ESPN even acknowledged the moment. "Nice. What a tremendous show of respect and honor shown to Grandmaster Kino."

"No wonder this young man is so popular," the other announcer said.

Rose smiled. "My bro, I can't even."

The others in the room agreed. Keegan watched intently and silently.

The young men moved to the center, bowed to the referee, and bowed to each other. The fight began.

Gabe struck first, fast and hard, with his very first sequence. The crowd at the arena went crazy. The crowd at Joe's was out of their chairs. The crowd at the Stewarts' startled the babies. The crowd at the Inn was only slightly more reserved. The roar at the arena was deafening.

Young Eric, Logan, Jeff's boys and the rest of the Kino family were on their feet cheering.

Gabe blocked a few incoming punches and kicks. Tony was having a hard time landing anything because Gabe was so quick. With every sequence that Gabe used in the first round, he scored.

Melody leaned over to Logan when the boys went to their corners to rest after the first round. "How many rounds do they fight?"

"Seven," Logan said. "Seven three-minute rounds, with a one-minute break between each round. Though, some of those one-minute rest periods will be longer because of TV."

Melody nodded, but frowned. "Seven rounds. That seems like a lot."

"It is a lot. Usually, a match would go no more than three rounds, like in the Olympics. This is a real test of strength and endurance. And the crowd is willing to pay to see it, because it's not gonna just be over in a few minutes."

"Unless Gabe knocks out his opponent," Melody said.

Logan smiled. "Yep, that could happen. And after that first round, I think it's a distinct possibility tonight."

Melody frowned. "So, then, the crowd will be disappointed that the fight was too short."

Logan smiled at her thought process. "Well, seeing a knockout is usually not disappointing in itself. So, there's that. But the Kinos *have* been thinking about ways to make this event even more entertaining."

"How?"

"Like, they're thinking about adding a replacement-fighter rule. Like, if either fighter scores a knockout before the fourth round, the winner would face a second guy, a fighter chosen to step in and fight the rest of the match."

"That doesn't seem fair."

Logan smiled. "I know, right? Tell ya about it in three minutes," he said as Gabe and Tony headed back out to fight again.

The second round went about like the first. Gabe connected with some devastating kicks and Tony didn't connect. When the bell rang the boys headed back to their corners.

"Okay," Melody said. "Let's get back to our discussion. Doesn't it seem

unfair that if you're good enough to knock someone out then you have to face another guy? A guy who's fresh?"

Logan grinned. "I understand what you're sayin'. First, it's not unfair if those are the rules, and everyone knows the rules from the beginning, and rules would apply to both fighters. Second, remember, it's a test of skills. Not just fighting skills but thinking skills. It's hard. Yes. But we're not worried about how hard it would be. We like the challenge.

"So, let's say they were using those rules tonight. Knowing he would have to face a fresh opponent if he knocked this guy out right now, Gabe would want to control the fight and not knock out his opponent until the fourth round. So, it would take more skill. More thought. More control. I think it would be an awesome rule. It might *seem* unfair, but like, um, take Navy SEAL underwater training. It doesn't seem fair that the instructors get to jump in and tear off their masks and stuff, but facing that, they're learning and developing amazing skills. And for us, tournaments are not about whether it seems fair or too hard or even winning. They're about facing impossible challenges to get better and to become more skilled."

Melody smiled at Logan. "Okay, I guess that's a good explanation."

He chuckled. "Anyway, they're only toying around with the idea. They haven't worked out all the detailed rules yet. It might never happen."

She nodded. "So, would you ever consider fighting in a Mini-MART?"

He shook his head. "No, because it's for black-belts only."

"Aren't you a black belt? I thought you were."

"I'm a 3rd degree black belt. I could fight in a Kino Challenge, but not in this because this is for 1st degree black belts only, and it's strictly for young fighters. They made the age limit seventeen to twenty for this one, and I'm thinkin' it will probably stay that way. This will be Gabe's last one."

"Why? He's only eighteen."

He grinned. "Because he doesn't know it yet, but Granddad is gonna promote him to 2nd degree after this fight."

The fighters rose from their corners and headed out for the third round.

✞✞✞

At the Tanner house, Rose was pacing back and forth behind the sofa. Lizzy was biting her lip. Keegan stood motionless against a wall. Jericho was smiling. "Man, oh man, he's doin' great," he said. He glanced at CJ, who actually nodded at him in agreement.

Laynah decided to FaceTime Daisy because she knew Rose would be too freaked out to talk.

"He's doing so good," Laynah said. "Dad says he's got this in the bag."

"Oh, Bugs, don't say stuff like that," Daisy said.

"Why? You worried about jinxing him? Jinxes don't work on Gabe. He's got a higher power on his side."

Daisy giggled.

Lily looked down as she received a FaceTime call, too. "Hey Heather!"

"He's doin' awesome!" Heather squealed.

Lily laughed. "He is! I hope he keeps it up. My heart is beating a million beats per minute."

"How's Rose?"

Lily turned her phone to show Rose pacing.

"Her usual place," Heather said with a laugh. "Lighten up, Rose, he's doin' great. It's gonna be okay."

Rose nodded but didn't speak.

"So, who's the hunk on the couch there?"

"That's Jericho Jones, Rose's new friend."

Lily turned her phone to Jericho. "Jericho, meet our oldest sister, Heather. She lives up in Tennessee."

Jericho smiled and waved at the camera. "Hey, Heather."

"Well, hello there, Jericho."

"Let me see," a voice said and Heather handed her phone to Nolan.

"Hey man. I'm Nolan, Heather's fiancé. Good to meet you."

"Hello, Nolan, nice to sort of meet you too."

Meanwhile, up in Athens, Georgia on the UGA campus, there was another big watch party going on. Peyton Murphy and his teammates were giddy over the match so far. Peyton had done nothing but brag on his friend Gabe since he'd been at school. Several of them had heard about Gabe from earlier in the year when he'd been abducted. When they found out Peyton was from Pine Forest, Georgia, they asked if he knew Gabe Tanner. Peyton had been happy to report that he and Gabe were best friends and he confirmed that Gabe really was the great guy he seemed to be, even letting them know that the truck Peyton was driving actually belonged to Gabe.

The team members had stood by Peyton's side when Gabe had been shot and almost died and many of them even prayed with him, some praying for the very first time in their lives. Since then, several had changed their ways and become followers of Jesus. Gabe's light had reached all the way across the state to Athens, Georgia.

The ESPN announcers had gone off on a spiel about Gabe's history and the rough year he'd had—last spring's Mini-MART, his abduction, his throat being cut while on the beach with his girlfriend, and his saving that girlfriend—who was Ricky and Bree Kinos' daughter—from being taken, only to be shot and stabbed in the process. They spoke about his foundation and the good works he was doing. Then they talked about Tony Omori and the rough life he'd had and how lucky he'd been to be selected to fight against Gabe. Though, he currently wasn't looking so lucky. Still, he'd come a long way.

Back in the *Rosewood Sports Arena,* the crowd was going wild and by the end of the fourth round Gabe had blocked every single punch and kick Tony had thrown. Gabe, on the other hand, had landed dozens of strikes and sent Tony down several times.

Gabe went back to his corner and spoke to Grandmaster Kino. Everyone watched the close-up on the jumbotron. Gabe was shaking his head. Grandmaster Kino nodded his head and put a hand on Gabe's shoulder. Gabe

was breathing hard. He drew several deep breaths, drank some water, and dried his face with the towel Jeff handed him.

Fifth round, on the very first exchange, Gabe blocked two punches and an incoming kick, then spun and kicked Tony in the head. He went down. Everyone thought the fight was over, but Tony stood back up. The referee restarted the fight. Gabe moved forward and offered knuckles to Tony.

Tony bumped knuckles with him and nodded to whatever Gabe said.

The rest of the fifth round Gabe never threw another punch.

Up in Athens one of Peyton's teammates got frustrated. "What's he doin?"

Peyton shrugged with a smile. "He's puttin' in the second string."

The last two rounds were nothing but a class in blocking skills. Gabe controlled the rounds without punishing Tony unnecessarily. When the final bell rang, the judges awarded Gabe a unanimous decision.

In Pine Forest, the family quieted as they watched the end of the fight.

Rose sat down next to Jericho. He smiled at her. "You're good now?"

She nodded and breathed a sigh of relief.

Keegan looked around at his family. "They're gonna need to find a stronger fighter to face anyone the Kinos train."

Lizzy nodded. "I agree. In the last Mini-MART both fighters were trained by Kino Martial Arts and it was a tough match. If they're gonna bring in someone from outside, it's gonna have to be someone really good."

Keegan nodded his head. "Puttin' anyone up against Kino Martial Arts is a gamble. Look at the Kino Challenges. No Kino student has ever lost. And Grandmaster Kino participated in four MARTs, and each time he did, he won."

"It really looks like Grandmaster Kino developed a model that is unbeatable," Rose said.

"Well, nothing is unbeatable, but it's pretty darn close," Keegan put in.

"The Kinos are definitely impressive," Jericho said. "I'd love to meet them one day."

"Oh, you will, because they're coming to join us for Thanksgiving," Lizzy said with a grin.

"Really?" Daisy asked.

Lizzy nodded.

"When did this happen?" Lily asked.

"Bree called me last night to accept our invitation to come and help at the center and share Thanksgiving with us and a bunch of people who are struggling. They were all in. And guess what! They bought the old Padgett house over off Magnolia just outside of town."

Violet smiled. "I love that old house. But I thought someone else bought it about a year ago."

"Yeah, they did. It was a real estate company that flips houses. And now the Kinos are gonna be able to come here a lot more often. And they're gonna add some cottages on the property like the Inn did, and might even let Lisa and Jodi handle renting out the cottages when the Kinos are not in town."

They watched the celebration and saw Gabe receive a golden championship

belt, shake hands with and hug Tony Omori, bow to Tony's senseis, and then turn and bow to both Grandmasters Kino. The cameras stayed on him as he was handed a microphone and asked some questions.

"How ya feel, Gabe?" an ESPN rep asked.

"Feel good, sir. And I'm really grateful that I was alive to be able to do the Mini-MART again. Ya know, that first one, it's kinda what started everything for me this year."

"But it's been a hard year, hasn't it?"

"Yes, sir. It's been hard, but everything that happened has made me a better person. Stronger. And it makes me more grateful than ever and makes me appreciate the most important things."

"What things are the most important to you, Gabe Tanner?"

"God, my family." He turned toward the stands with a smile. "My girl, Taylor. Her family. My friends. Oh, and speaking of my friends, shout-out to Peyton Murphy and his teammates on the baseball team over at UGA. Go Dawgs! Anyway, and just, people. All of these people," he said as he gestured toward the crowd. "And, like, all the people—all the kids on social media who've watched me and helped me and supported me and prayed for me during this year. They are the best Jesus warriors there are and I'm grateful for them." He nodded over at Tony. "And thanks to Tony and Williams Brothers Karate for coming down here from San Fran for this little event."

The announcer motioned to Tony to join them.

Tony moved forward and Gabe hugged him again.

"Tony, what would you like to say?"

Tony smiled. "It was an honor to come and fight this guy," he said, putting an arm around Gabe's shoulders. "I thought, he can't possibly be as good as everyone says he is. Well, he's great and it's gonna take someone a lot more experienced than me to beat him. He did a great job and I am humbled."

The announcer nodded his head. "Thanks, guys, and there you have it. We'll see everyone back here tomorrow night at the Kino Challenge and see if Eric Kino the Third, the son of Ricky Kino, can continue his father's legacy. Back to you, Bart," he said, speaking to the ESPN anchors.

Although the anchors began speaking, the camera stayed on Gabe as he made his way over to Taylor. He stood in front of her. "I'm really sweaty."

"I don't care," she said as she threw her arms around him and kissed him in front of everyone.

At the Tanner home, Rose smiled up at the screen. "My little brother. He's so in love with Taylor."

"Do you approve?" Jericho asked.

"Oh yeah. She's about the sweetest thing. Not all spoiled and bratty like you'd think. And that girl is so in love with my brother. They're really just a match made in heaven."

Lizzy sighed as Keegan helped her to get up off the couch. "It wouldn't surprise me a bit if they ended up getting married," she added.

"They're a little young, aren't they?" Jericho asked.

"Yes," Keegan answered. "And they'll wait a little longer, but I'm thinking it won't be that long. Because when you know, you know."

Jericho nodded and glanced at Rose, then looked over at CJ who was smiling at Violet as she spoke to him.

"Who would like some dessert?" Lizzy asked.

"I think we all would," Keegan answered, "and we'll all get it. You can sit in the kitchen and supervise."

She smiled and nodded, placing her arm under her belly as if she were helping to carry the load.

While people in households throughout Pine Forest enjoyed celebratory late-night snacks, Peyton glowed up at UGA with satisfaction at Gabe's shoutout while his teammates made bawdy comments about how his love life was about to improve.

✝✝✝

Matthew 18:19-20

"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth
agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them
by my Father in heaven. For where two or three
gather in my name, there am I with them."

Chapter Nineteen

Still Friday... Rosewood Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California

All of the people that were part of the Kino entourage, including a few of the Ameritech agents, returned to the room they'd used as the prayer room so they could gather their things and get ready to leave. When they entered the room, however, they found tables, chairs, balloons, a large cake, and a big sign that read, *"CONGRATS GABE, MINI-MART CHAMPION*." Right beneath it was an even bigger sign that read, "HAPPY 44TH BIRTHDAY JEFFERSON DAVIS!"

Jeff looked up at the sign and grinned. "What? You guys. Wow."

Mickey reached up and put her hand on his shoulder. "Tell the truth, Jeff, were you really surprised?"

"What? Yes, I really was. You did a great job of keeping it all hush-hush, Mick." He turned and put his arms around his pregnant wife. "Thank you, baby. I sure do love you."

"I love you too, Jeff. And you have your presents at the house."

He pulled her forward and kissed her softly. "Mick, you're the best."

Daniel and Jeremy came over to give their dad a birthday hug. "We hung the signs," Daniel said.

Jeff laughed. "Well then, good job on that and I'm glad to hear you didn't let your mom do it."

"Happy birthday, Dad," eleven-year-old Jeremy said.

Jeff smiled at his youngest son. "Thanks, Jerm. It's been a great day and this is just the best ending."

"Oh, but it's not over, Dad," Daniel said quickly. "Cuz we got stuff for you at home too."

"You *have* stuff for me," he corrected.

"Yeah, that's what I said." He grinned. "Happy birthday, Dad. We knew you wouldn't mind sharing your birthday with Gabe's special day too."

"You're right. I don't mind a bit, cuz Gabe is like family."

Gabe smiled.

"Look at the cake," Taylor said to Gabe.

He looked at the huge sheet cake and smiled. On one half it said *TEAM GABE ROCKS*, and on the other side, it said *Happy Birthday Jeff,* much smaller, to make room for forty-four candles.

Gabe made a face. "When you blow out the candles, make sure you keep your spit on your side of the cake."

Everyone chuckled. Bree said a few kind words about Jeff, reminding him

how sorry she was for what she had done to him twenty-two years earlier, and Jason said a few words about him being one of Ameritech's best. They sang "Happy Birthday" and he blew out the candles. The women took over cutting the cake and dishing it out. The children, who'd been sleepy and cranky before they came in the room, were suddenly wide awake and all smiles.

Gabe gobbled down a giant piece of cake, then headed to the locker room, where he showered and dressed. He did so quickly.

Young Eric also ate quickly, and asked Agent Wyatt if he would mind going to grab his car because he needed to get home and get to bed. While Eric waited for the car, the conversation turned to him and the three opponents he would face tomorrow.

When Agent Wyatt returned, Jordan approached young Eric and whispered in his ear. "Hey, Three. I'm gonna go on out to the car and put my foot up."

He turned to her and nodded with a smile. "Tell Agent Wyatt you're goin' out. And I'll be out in just a minute."

She nodded. "I will."

She headed toward the door and smiled at her bodyguard. "I'm gonna go sit in the car and put my foot up."

He nodded and headed out with her. He opened the passenger side door for her, she stood there. "I need to move the seat way back cuz I wanna put my foot up on the dash."

"Let me do it," he said. He reached down into the car to figure out the automated buttons.

"Jordan Brooks," someone yelled from behind the car. She turned at the male voice and saw a man approaching quickly. A man she didn't recognize.

"Yes?" she said.

"So you think you can come into my facility and threaten to press charges against my son?"

Her eyes opened wide. "First, I don't believe it's *your* facility. And maybe you need to do a better job raising your kid, because your son assaulted me."

"That's a lie and you know it," he said as he charged at her.

Jordan gasped and just before the man got to her Agent Wyatt stepped in front of Jordan.

"Back off."

"Who are you?" the man yelled.

"I'm the man who's gonna beat you to a bloody pulp if you don't back off."

"She threatened my son."

"Your kid assaulted her, like she said. Watch the video. And now, I'm thinking I know where he got it from. You just moved toward Miss Brooks in a threatening manner. I suggest you get your kid under control and get yourself under control or your life is about to get much harder."

The man backed away. "That's a threat and I'm gonna press charges."

Agent Wyatt smiled and nodded. "Go ahead and waste your time and money. This is not my first rodeo."

The man walked briskly away. Wyatt hit a button on his phone and tucked

it away in his suit jacket, then turned and looked down at Jordan. "You okay?"

She looked up at him, her face pale. "I, I think so."

He frowned. "You're shaking."

She looked down and he stepped forward and hugged her. "There now, hon, it's okay now. Take a deep breath. He's just a jerk. Don't let it get to you."

She nodded, pulled away and looked up at him.

He smiled. "I'm sorry it took me a minute to step in. I wanted to get the encounter on video."

"Oh, you recorded that?"

"Sure did."

She smiled. "That's good." She looked up, her eyes wide. "Um, Agent Wyatt, don't tell Three."

"What?"

"Don't tell young Eric what happened. Please. He needs to get a good night's rest and be ready for tomorrow with no distractions. I don't want him thinking about me or worrying about me."

"Jordan, he needs to worry about you. I mean, look at you. You're a mess. You're shaking like a leaf."

She nodded. "Yeah, but I'm okay. Really. Let me just take a few deep breaths." She stopped talking and drew three deep breaths and blew them out. "See, I'm already calmer. Please, don't tell him."

"We're not supposed to keep secrets for or from the client, hon."

"It's not because I'm trying to keep secrets from him. I'm asking this for his sake. You can tell him tomorrow, *after* the Challenge."

He sighed. He understood her dilemma and decided he could run it by Jason instead. Chief Director Lee, he thought, making the correction in his mind. "Okay," he agreed.

"Thank you so much. And don't say anything to Grandmaster Kino either, since his mind also has to be free and clear."

Wyatt smiled. "You're a headstrong little thing, aren't ya?"

She held out her hands, still trembling. "Apparently not."

He took her hands and squeezed them. "That's normal. You've been through a lot of trauma, recently and in the past, and trauma tends to have an effect on our bodies."

Young Eric came out the door and Jordan jerked her hands away from the agent. Wyatt turned quickly and ushered Jordan into the car. Young Eric nodded at him. "Thanks, Agent Wyatt," he said, though he didn't sound sincere.

"Take care, Eric. See you tomorrow."

Eric nodded, got in the car, started it up and pulled away. He glanced at Jordan. "So, you wanna tell me what that was all about?"

"What?" she asked innocently.

"Agent Wyatt and you out here holding hands."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jordan said. "We weren't holding hands."

"Then what were you doing?"

"We were talking, that's all. Are you seriously asking me if I'm being unfaithful to you?"

He sighed. "No. Not seriously, but that was quite a moment I saw as I came out the door."

"You think I'd turn my back on you and be with the guy who's my bodyguard?" she asked incredulously.

He shrugged. "With people in our lifestyle it actually happens all the time."

Her eyebrows rose. "Really?"

He glanced at her because she sounded so shocked. "Yes, really."

"And you really think that's what's happening?"

"No, but I know one thing."

"What?"

"You're not being honest with me right now."

"Oh really? And just what makes you think that?"

He thought a moment before he answered. "I'm not sure I want to take this any further at this time." His lips pressed tightly together and the muscle in his jaw flexed.

Her eyes blinked in disbelief. "Are– are you saying you don't want to speak to me?"

"I guess I am," he muttered.

Her eyes filled with tears and she turned away, looking out her window as they drove the rest of the way in silence.

At the house, he spoke briefly to her. "Jordan, do you need anything before I turn in?"

She shook her head.

"Okay then, well, good night, Jordan."

She swallowed and looked up into his handsome face. She thought she saw a flicker of regret. "Night," she mumbled as she went into her room and softly closed the door.

Over the next hour she heard the sounds of the rest of the family returning home and getting settled and going to bed. She couldn't sleep. Her heart was in turmoil. How this all got turned around so quickly she didn't know. But she did know that if she was having trouble sleeping, then maybe he was too. And that wouldn't be good either. She rose from her bed, grabbed her crutches, put on her robe and headed out. But she didn't go to Three's room. She went downstairs and softly knocked on the Kinos' bedroom door.

Ricky opened the door and his brows rose. "Jordan? What's wrong?"

She offered a timid smile. "Um, well, I know it's late, but could I talk to you and Mrs. Kino?"

He nodded and opened the door. Bree rose and patted the bed beside her. "Come sit, sweetie, and tell us what's goin' on."

Their kindness brought tears to her eyes. She sat on the side of their bed. Mr. Kino sat in a chair across from the bed and smiled kindly.

"I messed up," she began. She went on to tell them the whole story of how something as innocent as her trying to keep young Eric from worrying about

her, turned into her and young Eric having a fight.

"Well, it's not as bad as I thought this was gonna be," Ricky said.

"I agree," Bree said. "There's an easy solution."

"Really?"

She nodded. "You just have to talk to him. Tell him the whole truth. Your heart was in the right place, but right now, he's probably not sleeping and more worried than he would have been over the original problem."

She looked over at Mr. Kino and he nodded. "Communication is the key."

"So, I should speak to him now? Tonight?"

They both nodded.

She sighed. "Okay, I will. I'm, uh, sorry to wake you guys."

"It's okay, sweetie," Bree said. "Please know, you can always come to us. Anytime and about anything."

Jordan smiled, rose and bent over to hug Mrs. Kino. "Thank you guys so much," she said as she turned to hug Mr. Kino.

Jordan headed straight to Eric's door. She didn't knock because she didn't want to wake Taylor or Gabe or Alec and Desi. She eased open the door and knew immediately that he wasn't asleep or even in bed, because his silhouette was dark against the light coming in the glass doors that overlooked his private deck. He turned toward her when she came into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Jordan? You okay?"

She sniffed at the concern in his voice. "No, I'm not okay. Are you?"

"No, I'm not," he said softly.

She walked to him, the clicking of the crutches making it seem clumsy. She stopped right in front of him and looked up at his face, which was in shadow.

"I need to talk to you. I need to tell you what happened tonight."

He sighed in relief. "Okay. That would be great. But let's sit, so you can put your foot up."

She nodded, his consideration of her making her heart swell.

They sat on the bed, side by side, sitting up against the headboard. He laid his open hand out beside her. An invitation she wouldn't refuse. She placed her hand in his and even though no words had been spoken yet, the relief was instantaneous.

He didn't speak. Only waited for her to tell him what she wanted to tell him. He listened as she spoke in soft tones, trying to explain how she didn't want him to worry about her, and then how Agent Wyatt said he couldn't keep secrets, and then how the whole misunderstanding took place. She explained how she realized the misunderstanding was probably worse for him than the original problem and that she went to speak with his parents and then came straight to talk to him. "I'm sorry," she said as she ended her speech. "I didn't mean for this to get all twisted around."

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it softly. "So, this whole thing was because you were trying to protect me so that I wouldn't mess up at the Challenge tomorrow?"

"I guess."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I'm not so sensitive that me being concerned for you would change the way I fight. It makes me think you don't have much faith in me."

She sighed. "Well, it really wasn't that I don't have faith in you. I just didn't want to be the cause of any distraction."

"Jordan, your existence is a huge distraction. A welcome distraction. With my mind on you, I feel like I can do anything. I can accomplish anything. With my mind on you and our future, I will fight harder than I ever have. You are not a distraction really, that's a bad word for how it is. You are my—motivation. You are my everything."

"And yet you have very little faith in me," she said softly.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about how quickly you thought I was having some kind of relationship with Agent Wyatt."

"Come on, babe, I didn't really think that. I only knew that you weren't being honest with me."

"How? How did you know that?"

He shrugged. "I saw Wyatt holding your hands before I ever came out of the door. And then I come outside and you jerked your hands away from him like you'd been caught with your hands in the cookie jar. If you weren't trying to keep something from me, you would have simply looked my way and then back at Wyatt and finished your conversation, whatever that was and I would've asked why he was holding your hands and he would've told me because they were shaking because the dude just scared you."

"You're pretty smart, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm fairly intelligent."

"Three, I would never, ever, be unfaithful to you. Not ever. I love you. And no other man is meant for me except you. You told me yourself that God brought us together."

He smiled. "I did. And I truly believe that. The question is, do you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I believe that. And that's why I've been lying in that bed across the hall and tossing and turning and needing to be with you."

"Jordan, I'm sorry, baby."

"For what?"

"For making you feel like I didn't want to speak to you. For *saying* that I didn't want to speak to you. I actually DID want to speak to you. I just didn't like the direction the conversation was headed, and needed to stop, and think, and pray for a minute."

"And did you? I mean, did you pray?"

"Yes. And the only thing that happened was my heart became so full of love for you that I couldn't contain it. I had to get up and pace the room and when you came in I was thinking about going for a night run on the beach."

She smiled. "That's a no-no."

"For you, it's a no-no. *I* can take care of myself."

"Ya mean like when a homeless man stuck a needle in your neck and took you to Mexico?"

He chuckled. "Touché."

She turned slightly to look up at him. "So, Three, are we good?"

He smiled. "Yes, baby, we're good. So good."

She grimaced. "I guess I need to go back to my room and let you sleep."

He sighed. "Stay. I mean, will you stay with me? No messing around, I promise. I just wanna hold you."

She started sliding down onto the bed.

"I'll take that as a yes?"

She giggled. "You know, you literally don't have to ask me twice."

He scooted down, turned toward her, and took her in his arms. "Now this is heaven." He looked into her eyes and slowly moved to kiss her.

"I'm sorry I made you cry," he said softly, once he pulled back from the kiss. "I'm sorry about everything, but I gotta say, this making-up thing, it's good stuff."

She smiled and pressed in closer.

He frowned. "And I'm sorry that Kenneth Dupree had the audacity to confront you. I'm not sure what he was thinking. Maybe he was trying to intimidate you into not pressing charges against his son."

"Then he's an idiot," Jordan said. "I mean, if he had any chance at all, it would've been if he had come to me humbly, apologized, and simply asked me to not press charges and maybe that they'll do better about raising their kid. But these people think they can do whatever they want without having to face any consequences. I'm thinking it's time someone put them in their place."

"I agree with you, Two-three, and I love your strength. That's the same strength you showed when you went to court against your stepfather. You are a force to be reckoned with."

"Yeah, and then I fall apart."

"That makes it more impressive. You're strong when you have to be and then afterward you fall apart. At least you wait until afterward," he said with a short laugh. "I'm so proud of you."

They snuggled closer.

Jordan yawned. "What time is your alarm set for?"

"No alarm tonight. I get to sleep until I wake up."

"Oh thank goodness."

He sighed. "Yep." He leaned forward and kissed her for a long time.

✝✝✝

November 9th, Saturday Afternoon

Rosewood Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California

The place was a madhouse. The excitement surrounding the event was palpable. The Kino Challenge had grown in popularity over the past twenty-something years. The first Challenge had been fought because a paparazzo had accused Ricky Kino of being a fake, a movie martial artist who couldn't actually fight. During the first Challenge, Ricky was thirty years old and had

trained for only three weeks. Just a few weeks before he began training he'd been abducted and tortured almost to death. And in that first one, he'd fought five opponents. Now things had changed.

Ricky fought several more Kino Challenges before he decided to retire. Eventually, they got Joey, Rick's little brother, to step in to fight. There was certainly no shortage of people wanting to step up and challenge the Kinos. So far, no one had been able to best them. Now, Joey was getting older. He'd just turned thirty-eight this past August, and he'd wanted to pass the torch and young Eric was selected.

When that happened there was a slew of guys wanting to get in the ring. After all, young Eric was untested. He hadn't fought in tournaments like Ricky and Joey had. No one really knew if he was the real deal like his father. He was young. Only twenty. They knew he'd dropped out of college. They knew he had Grandmaster Kino as his teacher. That same teacher had just come through a harrowing life-and-death situation and miraculously survived, and some people thought that meant he wasn't up to par. They didn't realize that it meant there was a reason he was still on this earth.

The Challenge had morphed from facing five fighters to facing three and having a younger competitor face the two fighters in a separate division. That younger competitor was always chosen from one of the Kino schools because he represented the Kino family. That tradition would continue. Kino Martial Arts masters from around the world submitted recommendations for their students to fight in the Challenge and it had become quite a process to narrow it down each year.

So many were deserving. So they implemented a series of "Best of the Best" tournaments that narrowed the field to ten top fighters. Grandmaster Kino and the family then interviewed and discussed the candidates before choosing one to represent them. Today's younger male fighter would be Caleb Rice, a young man from West Virginia, a second-degree black belt who was training to become a physical therapist.

Another facet of the Kino Challenge—the female division—began when Jeffy Kino was only twenty. She fought and won for three years. Jeffy's best friend, Jason Lee's daughter Kim Lee, also fought for three years. For the past two years, Kino Martial Arts student Emma Kennedy had held that honor, but she'd married the past year and now had other priorities. This year, another Kino student would have that honor: twenty-two-year-old Sarah Corbin, a Utah Tech student from St. George, Utah.

After an opening ceremony featuring the introduction of the female fighters and a rendition of *America the Beautiful*, sung by country music Hall of Famer, Toby Nash, the women would fight first. Between the two female fights, there would be a dance performance by the LA Rams dance team. After the second female fight, the award would be presented and there would be a break during which, like yesterday's pre-tournament entertainment, several martial arts demo teams, acrobats, gymnasts, and cheerleading stunt duos would perform. Then the young male fighters would be introduced. Between their two fights,

the LA Chargers Dance Team would perform. After the second young male fight there would be a shorter break, during which the final introductions and the singing of the National Anthem by a special group would take place.

After that, finally, it would be young Eric's turn to prove himself. He would fight three different opponents; each fight would consist of three three-minute rounds, with a one-minute break between the rounds. Between each fight Eric could choose the length of each break, but it could exceed twenty minutes. During one of those breaks Toby and Gracie Nash and a surprise artist would perform a few numbers and during another one of those breaks, dancers from *America Can Dance* would mesmerize the crowd.

Meanwhile, sports networks were getting set up, and people were filing in. Gabe, Taylor, and Agent Ward, Taylor's bodyguard, made a couple of deliveries to the concession areas. Miss Jewell's goodies sold out the night before within an hour. They were delivering twice as many today. Gabe and Taylor had been stopped several times to sign autographs, so it turned out that it took much longer than they expected to deliver the goodies. Luckily, there were no juvenile delinquents to chase down this time.

Meanwhile, in the locker room, young Eric finished his warmup and was listening intently to everything his grandfather, father, Cam, and Joey were telling him. He didn't say much himself. He only focused on what they said and nodded. Gabe made it back to the locker room and sought him out.

"How ya feelin'?" Gabe asked.

Young Eric nodded. "I'm good."

Logan was on the phone and motioned to Gabe and young Eric. "Hey, guys, can we get together for a moment? I mean, in private?"

"There's a small room across the hall that's not occupied," Gabe said.

"How do you know that?" young Eric asked, a smile on his face.

Gabe shrugged. "Sometimes a guy has to have some privacy."

"So, does Taylor know about this room across the hall?"

Gabe shrugged with a smile. "Yep."

"Dad, we'll be right back. Just need a few minutes," young Eric said.

Ricky nodded.

Young Eric, Gabe and Logan headed across the hall. Once there, Logan hit the button to unmute his video call and held his phone up. "Okay, JoJo, go ahead. We found a quiet spot and we're all together."

"Hey, guys," JoJo said.

Gabe smiled and waved at the camera.

"Hey, Jo," Eric said.

"Can't tell you how much I wish I was there with you to share this moment with you, Eric. You know I love ya, bro."

Eric nodded. "I do, JoJo and backatcha. And I guess you know I hate missing your games."

"I know. Though you've been to like, a hundred of them. But tonight is a big deal for you and I'm sorry I can't be there."

"JoJo, you know I completely understand."

"Of course. I'm just sayin'. Anyway, so, I thought maybe we could have a word of prayer together, just us four brothers."

Gabe immediately teared up and he raised his eyes heavenward in gratitude for the loving gesture that would include him in this group of amazing guys.

"Gabe, before we pray, I just want you to know that I watched you last night and you totally rocked the house. So proud of you."

"Thanks, JoJo. Means a lot coming from you."

"I bragged to my team about you and they all were also blown away."

"Cool."

"So, you guys ready to pray?" JoJo asked.

Young Eric knelt on the floor and Logan and Gabe knelt with him. "Yep, we're ready. Who's gonna say the prayer?"

"I will," JoJo said. He grew quiet for a moment, and immediately got emotional as soon as he directed his thoughts to his Father in Heaven. He cleared his throat. "Father," he sniffed. "Father, I know that You know how much we love You and how much we love Your Son Jesus Christ, and how grateful we are for all that You've blessed us with. I know You know how much we love each other. I could go on to talk about all the people we love, but right now I just wanted to talk to you about this small group. Father, we are so blessed to have each other. Thank You for sending us down to this Earth to homes that would teach us and bring us together."

He stopped to draw a deep breath. "Father, I feel, I think we all feel that You have something big for us to do. And we're willing. We are so willing. We want to be Your warriors. We want to do Your will. And we don't care about the glory or about the winning, Father. We just want to serve You. So today, on this important day in young Eric's life, where he is supposed to prove himself as a man, we ask Your blessing upon him. Not to make him win, because we realize that the people he's fighting are also Your children. But we ask that Your will be done in this testing ground today. Protect young Eric from harm. Help him to do his very best. Make him strong. Make him quick. Make him think fast. All of this, Father, only if it is Your will, for we only want to do Your will. Help us all, Father, to set a good example that will bring many of Your lost children back to You."

He hesitated and then went on. "Father, please, also protect them all from harm. Right now I know for sure that Jordan and Taylor are dearly loved by two of these guys, so please keep them safe too. And bless Logan and me that we, too, will find the right companions. So, I just thought I'd add that in. Anyway, Father, we ask You to be with us in all that we say and do. And we pray, as always, in Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," the other three firmly agreed.

"Well, guys, I gotta get back to the locker room," JoJo said.

"Okay," Gabe said. "You go on back to your team, but just let me say, Father, watch over JoJo too, and keep him safe and help him play his best today, in Jesus' name, Amen."

"Amen," the other three answered.

"Love you, brothers," JoJo said quickly and ended the call.

"Well, if that doesn't give you the warm fuzzies, then I don't know what will," Gabe muttered, making Logan and Eric laugh.

They put their arms around him and hurried back to their own locker room.

✝✝✝

In the prayer room, young Eric looked around at all the people who wanted to pray for him. This time Toby Nash, his wife, Miss Caroline, and their daughter, Grace, joined them. Toby and Ricky had been good friends for many years and Toby had been at the original Kino Challenge. Steve Reynolds was also here, another of his father's good friends who'd attended that first Challenge. He'd had to leave that first Challenge to get info that would help catch Tommy Crane, the man who'd tortured his father and kidnapped his Aunt Jeffy. It seemed to be a theme in their family.

Also here today were the regulars, Grandma and the new children, Cam and a very pregnant Aunt Jeffy, Uncle Joey and Aunt Breez with their little ones, Sophia, Kelstyn, and Ledger. Aunt Bella was here. She too was pregnant, and wasn't feeling well enough to travel to JoJo's game with her husband. She had little Emily with her. Also here today was Jeff Davis; his pregnant wife, Mickey; and their boys, Daniel and Jeremy.

Young Eric glanced around and saw his Uncle Justin and Aunt Lori; Uncle Jason and Aunt Angel; pseudo cousin, Kim, who was pregnant and her husband, Jensen Deal; Alec and pregnant Desi; Gabe, Taylor, Logan, Melody, Mrs. Perez, Josie and Jamie. And, of course, his grandparents, father, mother, and Jordan. His Jordan. There were well over forty people if you counted all the babies that hadn't been born yet. And if you counted the Ameritech agents assigned to certain people, the number would be closer to fifty.

His grandfather called the group to order and they immediately quieted, even the little ones.

"Just want to say how grateful I am for all of you who are here with us to help support young Eric. He's worked hard. He's been through some bad times, but he's overcome and he's ready. He's focused. If you're here then you recognize that this is an important time for young Eric. He's untested. He hasn't done the tournament route that his father took. There's a huge crowd out there wondering, *What's this guy got in his tank*. He's about to show them and I think he will probably surprise them, but whatever happens, I know he'll give it his all, because that's exactly what he's been doing for the past ten weeks and exactly what his father has trained him to do all of his life.

"So, anyway, sorry that I've kept you waiting. I went to speak with Sarah and Caleb who are also representing Kino Martial Arts today, and they too are ready. I wanted to pray with them or over them and make sure they understand that because they represent us, they have to conduct themselves with the utmost honor." He glanced at his grandson. "You too, Eric. But that doesn't mean I don't want you to be fierce. You be fierce. You be strong. You be what we've trained you to be."

Eric nodded. Suddenly, little Nate ran to him and Eric knelt down to him.

"I don't want you to fight," he said.

"Hey, I'm gonna be fine. Wait and see."

He lifted Nate up into his arms. "Give me a number. The number of times I should punch or kick each person."

"Um, two hundred forty-three thousand."

Eric chuckled. "Give me a number under, like, um, two hundred."

"Um, one hundred and twenty-three."

Eric nodded. "Good number. I like it. Okay, watch closely and keep count for me."

Nate nodded and Eric set him down.

"Rick," Grandmaster Kino said. "Would you like to pray today?"

Ricky nodded. "I'd be honored, sir."

They stood in a large circle as Eric's father prayed over him. He prayed for safety and for excellence and for sportsmanship and gave thanks for the love of the people there, and for the gift of the cross, and blessed the entire event and all those in attendance. It was beautiful and the Spirit was strong and there were many wet eyes by the time he finished. Young Eric opened his eyes and looked around with a smile. He caught Jordan's eye and smiled at her and nodded, acknowledging the lovely moment.

Once the prayer ended Taylor pulled Gabe aside. "I'd like to go to the women's locker room and see Sarah and wish her luck."

Gabe nodded. "I was told to make sure Agent Ward stays with us no matter what, so go tell him and I'll meet y'all at the door."

Gabe told young Eric where he was going and also reminded him that the small room across the hall is empty, in case young Eric needed to kiss his girl. Gabe then went to the door to wait on Taylor, who was telling her parents where she was going and nabbing her bodyguard. Gabe watched her approach.

Even as casually as she was dressed, the girl was stunning. Yesterday she'd worn one of the new Team GABE shirts. Today, she wore a Kino Martial Arts shirt, and she wore it proudly. Paired with her jeans and tucked in, it was difficult to miss the shape of her perfect body. Her long dark hair was down, her face was as beautiful as ever. And as beautiful as she was, the cool thing was that she was even more beautiful on the inside. So sweet, so kind, so strong, so smart, so down to earth and so innocent. The girl was perfect, and he was a lucky guy.

He walked with her and Agent Ward to the women's locker room and waited outside. Taylor knocked briefly, then pushed the door open and was stopped immediately by Sarah's security.

Taylor smiled. "Hey, I'm Taylor Kino. I just wanted to speak to Sarah for a minute."

The man studied her briefly and nodded. "Hold on a minute."

He spoke into his phone for a few seconds and then smiled at her and nodded. "Go ahead back."

Taylor made her way back and the group of people got quiet as she entered the space. Taylor approached Sarah, held out her hand. "Hey Sarah, I'm Taylor

Kino."

Sarah smiled. "Hi! It's so nice to meet you," she said as she shook hands with Taylor. "You're even prettier in person."

Taylor smiled. "Awww, thanks. You are too. I just wanted to meet you and let you know that we'll all be cheering for you, our whole family. I was reading about you and I think you're awesome and I'm glad you were chosen to represent Kino Martial Arts."

"Thank you so much."

"So, do you feel ready?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm ready. A little nervous."

"I guess that's to be expected, but I'll tell you what my grandfather always tells his students. Tournaments don't matter. They are only useful to help us to learn more about ourselves and to make us stronger and better. So as long as you do your very best and don't quit no matter what, then win or lose, you've still won."

Sarah nodded and smiled at the woman next to her. Taylor turned to look at the woman. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. I was just so excited to meet Sarah. I'm Taylor." She extended her hand.

"I didn't mean to be rude either," Sarah said. "I was excited that you would come to see me. Taylor, this is one of my teachers, Master Emma. And this is my mom, Liv Corbin, and this is my sister Blythe Corbin and these are my friends, Jade and Cassie."

Taylor shook hands with all of them and noticed Sarah signing to her mother and her friends.

"Wow, that is so cool," Taylor said. "I read that you were getting your degree in ASL. It's really cool."

Sarah nodded. "Thanks," she said as she continued to sign.

"So, what did you just say?"

"I was telling my mother and my friend what you said. And now I'm gonna sign my response to what you said. I really love learning ASL. And I intend to help a lot of people and one day teach. My mother is hearing impaired and so is my friend, Cassie, so I'm signing for them."

Taylor nodded. "Well, I think that's very cool. Okay, so, Gabe is outside the locker room waiting on me, so I guess I'd better get going and let you finish getting ready."

"Gabe is outside? Can we meet him?"

Taylor smiled. "Of course. Everyone wants to meet Gabe. Everyone's dressed, so he can come in?" she asked.

"Oh absolutely," Jade said quickly.

Taylor poked her head out and smiled at Gabe. "Um, Gabriel Tanner, I have been asked to bring you in so you can meet some people."

"Oh, okay," he said and followed her inside the locker room.

Taylor made the introductions while Sarah signed.

Taylor watched with pride as her guy smiled warmly, shook hands with and charmed all six ladies with small bits of conversation. They congratulated him

on his fight the day before and he gave Sarah a short pep talk that made them giggle because he said almost exactly what Taylor had said earlier. Everyone except her mother took selfies with him and asked for his autograph and then asked Taylor for hers. Then finally, they said their goodbyes and headed out.

Back in the hallway, Taylor giggled. "Gabe, you know that those girls were all about you."

He sighed. "Well, Taylor, honestly, I might have picked up on that, but it doesn't matter because I totally belong to you."

"Oh, I know. But it's always good for you to remind me."

He chuckled.

As they came down the corridor, the door to the small room opened and young Eric and Jordan stepped out. Gabe grinned at them.

As they neared the prayer room, the door opened and everyone began pouring out. The two couples followed as the entire group filed into the arena and headed to their designated seats in the VIP section.

Melody's family and a few others who'd been invited to be their guests at the Challenge were already there.

They all sat down, ignoring all the cameras being pointed at them, from network cameras to social media pros to cell phones. Only a few minutes later the announcer walked to the middle of the thirty-by-thirty ring.

"Hello, everyone, good afternoon and welcome to the 22nd Kino Challenge!" He waited a few moments until the applause died down. "Man oh man do we have a spectacle for you to see today and into the night! The official Olympic Taekwondo Demonstration Team is here! Kito Brothers Karate Board Breakers are here! The So Cal Gymnastics Club is here. The Cheng Fire Dancers are here! LA Rams Cheerleaders are here! The LA Chargers Dance Team are here! The top five national Cheerleading Stunt teams are here! The Marine Division drumline is here! Toby Nash and Grace Nash are here, AND we have a special surprise singer of the National Anthem later this evening before the big event, who is currently a social media star and is working on a breakout album, can you guess who it is? I'll leave that one for you to think about." He smiled at some of the people calling out the correct name and pointed his microphone in several different directions.

"Now, don't forget people, that all the proceeds of tonight's Kino Challenge will go to three different foundations. The *Angel Network Foundation*, founded by Angel Lee, wife of Jason Lee, the chief director of Ameritech Security. Her foundation serves women and children nationwide, and you can find out all about what they do at *TheAngelFoundation.com*. The second Foundation is the *Gabe Tanner Foundation* founded by last night's Mini-MART Champion, Gabe Tanner. Gabe is a national treasure and social media star who will soon be joining Ameritech's ranks. His foundation serves our nation's young people. Find out more at *GabeTanner.com*. And last but not least, the third Foundation is the *Heal the World Foundation*, founded by Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace and you can find out more about them at *HealtheWorld.com*. All three of these founders are in our audience today. Let's

ask them to stand and give them a round of applause.

Gabe, Angel, and Jeffy all stood and waved to the crowd. All three tapped their chest in gratitude for the immense support.

"So," the announcer went on. "Let's get to it! Attention la—dies and gentle— men. Our first competition tonight is the female division of the Kino Challenge."

He went on to introduce the judges, referee, timekeepers, and each competitor and her team. They lined up along the sides of the ring.

"Everyone please rise and let's listen to *America the Beautiful*, sung by five-time Grammy winner, Toby—Nash, joined by his beautiful daughter, Gracie—Nash!"

The crowd applauded and cheered, then quieted as the music began and Toby with his guitar stepped up onto a platform beside the ring, then turned and held his hand out to his daughter. As they began to sing, the jumbotron showed amazing footage of the country's beautiful landscapes, waterways, mountains, forests, deserts, and farmlands. Then it changed to scenes of kindness—people picking up trash, helping an old woman cross the street, pulling a dog out of a canal, and pushing a stalled car to the side of the road. Lastly, it switched to MLB batters hitting home runs, fielders scooping up the ball, then NFL QBs throwing TDs and defensive players delivering big hits, then amazing NBA shots, and, lastly clips from last year's Challenge showing Joey Adams in action. It ended with the American flag blowing in the wind. The crowd was uplifted, inspired, and roaring when Toby and Grace finished singing.

The female fighters came to center ring, and the fight was on.

✝✝✝

November 9th, Saturday Afternoon
Copeland Home, Hillcrest, California

Charity Copeland walked briskly into the den where her father was sitting, grabbed the remote and changed the channel.

"What are you doing?" Dustin Copeland asked his eldest daughter.

"I'm gonna watch the Kino Challenge and so are you. And you too, Mom," she said as Marvenia Copeland came into the room.

"Young lady, I don't know who you think you are, but..." Dustin began.

Charity interrupted. "I'm your daughter who has always believed in you as a good man, Dad. So stop trying to change my mind. Jesus said to love everyone and forgive everyone and you need to humble yourself and stop being so stubborn. If you don't, I'm gonna out you to all of your uppity friends and tell them that you don't really practice what you preach. Now, my little sister, your baby daughter, is getting married in one week and you are gonna be there and walk her down the aisle. AND, you are gonna ask her to forgive you for not helping her when she needed help."

"Charity, you are crossing a line," he warned, though his voice wasn't very strong as he said it.

"Yeah well, you crossed the line a long time ago, Dad, when you tossed

your own daughter out onto the street. And then you crossed it again when Mr. Kino came to you to tell you how he, a stranger, is doing more for your daughter than you, her own father. And you crossed the line when Mrs. Morgan came here yesterday and begged you to soften your heart and be there for your daughter because she was gonna be there for her son. And you crossed the line by keeping your own wife, the woman you say you love, from seeing her own daughter and being with her as she carries her grandson, which is also YOUR grandson and nobody has spoken harshly enough to you to let you know that you, Dad, are flat out in the wrong here and you'd better have a change of heart or I swear to you, I'm gonna do something drastic. Now, look at the screen. See there? Just behind the ring, on the second row. See who that is? That's your little girl! Do you see her? She's gonna go on in her life no matter how much support she gets from you or how little support she gets from you. And I don't know what else to say except I'm ashamed of you, Dad." Her voice broke as she said those words. "And I never thought I would say that! So, freakin' ashamed of you. Now, Dad, look at that sweet face of your little girl, and you remember all the happy times and you forgive her and you call her right NOW!"

By the time she finished, she was screaming at the top of her lungs. Her father only stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. And just maybe she had. But enough was enough. Then she thought of something else. "And ya know what? All this is just your pride. You just can't admit that you're wrong. Well you *are* wrong, Dad, and *everyone* knows it, or everyone will know it, cuz I swear I'm gonna out you. Swallow your damn pride and forgive your little girl and ask her to forgive you. DO THE RIGHT THING!"

She threw herself down on the couch and looked up at the screen and watched her sister interact with her fiancé, smile and speak to Taylor Kino and Gabe Tanner, applaud the fighters.

Charity turned to her father again. "And another thing. Do you intend for your own grandson to go through his life without having a loving grandfather? Because Alec doesn't have a dad. Do you intend for your grandson to learn that being a Christian doesn't really mean anything? Because look at his grandfather—he doesn't live like Jesus taught. Love one another. Forgive one another. Why is it so hard to get through to you!" she screamed.

Dustin Copeland was literally dumbfounded. Finally, he looked up at the screen and saw his beautiful young Destiny. His sweet girl. The apple of his eye. There she was sitting next to the boy who'd gotten her pregnant. Still, Dustin admitted to himself, the boy hadn't abandoned her. Ricky Kino had said Alec had tried to take care of her. He watched as Destiny whispered something in Alec Morgan's ear and he immediately rose. He held out his hand and took hers and helped her to her feet. He then helped her go to the aisle and turn away from the ring and walk away.

"She's probably going to the bathroom," Charity said to her mother. "See how he treats her, how he helps her, how he takes care of her? Did Dad ever treat you like that, Mom? Was he ever kind to you? What did you see in him?

I mean, his heart is so cold. Was he ever kind? Did he ever smile or did he ever make you laugh?"

Dustin's eyes left the screen and went to his eldest daughter as the questions she asked his wife dawned on him. And something happened. He started to feel regret. He started to feel. He started to question. Had his heart actually gone cold? And when did that happen? Was it when his sunshine got pregnant, or was it way before that?

Even though Marvenia hadn't responded, Charity went on, asking her mother questions. "Like, Mom, look at how you do everything for Dad. You take care of this home, you cook and clean and he always has clean clothes to wear and shampoo in the shower, and razors to shave with—whatever he needs. You smile at him. You're respectful to him. I think you even love him. But I have no idea if he even loves you. You do everything for him. And you do it willingly, with care and with love. Is he kind to you? I mean, I'd have no problem doing all that for a man who, like, followed the teachings of Jesus, who loved God, whose heart is filled with love, like Mr. Kino. He's so kind and wise, any woman would love to take care of him. But Dad, he's not kind. I used to think he was wise, but he's now making me think otherwise. And you know what, Mom? Realizing that makes me feel scared, and alone and I hate the way it makes me feel."

"Hush now," Marvenia said softly. "Hush now, sweetheart. It's gonna be okay. We're gonna figure this out."

"Yeah, and you know why you can say that? Because even though he refuses to forgive Destiny, you forgive him. Mom, I know I'm not supposed to hate someone, and I'm trying really hard not to hate him, but it's getting harder and harder. I'm supposed to honor my father and mother, but he's making it almost impossible."

Dustin Copeland rose from the sofa and silently walked out of the room.

✝✝✝

Colossians 3:18-21
"Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands,
as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives
and do not be harsh with them.
Children, obey your parents in everything,
for this pleases the Lord.
Fathers, do not embitter your children,
or they will become discouraged."

Chapter Twenty

November 9th, Saturday Afternoon
Rosewood Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California

Gabe smiled at Taylor as she jumped up and cheered for the third round of Sarah's second fight. "Hey, Tay, so tell me, have you ever thought about fighting in the Challenge?"

She smiled. "When I was little I did. I told Dad I wanted to fight like Aunt Jeffy did."

"How old is little? Cuz, like, you're still little."

She laughed. "When I was maybe eight or nine."

He nodded. "And now?"

She shrugged. "I still think it would be cool, but I'm so busy with school and now with dance."

"But you graduate in the spring, and then you'll have more time."

She nodded. "Yeah, but you know what? I'm not sure if I can do it. I mean, I've watched Granddad train you guys. I don't know if I have what it takes."

"Well, Tay, you definitely have the talent and the skills. All you have to do is get in competition shape."

Taylor nodded. "It has been a dream of mine."

"You can do it. You just need a little confidence. Maybe you could do some smaller tournaments to get a feel for it. Some local tourneys. And if you do well, it will help you decide if you should pursue that dream."

She smiled. "Actually, that sounds like something I could do."

Gabe nodded. "I would love to see you fight in a tournament."

"If you would love to see it, then maybe I'll do it."

He frowned. "No, Tay. You can't do it because *I* would like to see it. You'd have to do it because *you* want to do it."

"Well, I do want to, and I want you to be proud of me."

"I am proud of you, silly. You're the best girl I know. The best."

She smiled. "Do you think I could actually represent my family in a Challenge one day?"

"Uh, yeah. I do. You can do anything you put your mind to and I know for sure that your dad and granddad won't let you fail."

"Well, I'd have to get my 2nd degree to fight in a Challenge."

He nodded. "Something to work for. I'll support you in any way you need."

✝✝✝

Young Eric smiled at Jordan when she placed her hand on his leg.

"Is your ankle bothering you?"

"Not too much. I'm okay right now. How are you feeling?"

"Feeling great. Gonna go back for my second warm-up when Caleb comes out to fight. I'm really hungry. I'm not supposed to eat anything else, but I'm thinkin' one of your mom's cookies would be so good right now."

"Well, if you're not supposed to eat anything else, you'd better obey Grandmaster Kino."

"I'm gonna go ask him."

He rose and went to speak to his grandfather. Jordan watched and saw Grandmaster Kino look at his watch, then smile and nod.

Young Eric headed to the concession area. He was stopped several times, patted on the back, kissed on the cheek, wished good luck, told to kick butt, asked for autographs and selfies. He finally made it back with a huge load of goodies for everyone, including the nine little ones.

He sat back down next to Jordan, handed her a cookie and peeled away the wrapping from his own giant cookie. "I think I just personally bought out your mom's cookies."

Jordan giggled. "They really are so good."

Eric took a big bite and closed his eyes in ecstasy. "They really are."

Jordan glanced over at her mother who was smiling and talking with Mrs. Kino and with Bella Adams. Her mom had little Emily on her lap. Jordan smiled and turned back to Three. "I don't think I've ever seen my mom so happy. Not ever."

Eric glanced up at the sweet lady.

"She smiles all the time now," Jordan said. "I never really noticed that she didn't smile before, but now that she does smile, I realize how unusual it was for her before. And she's not tired all the time and she's not struggling to make ends meet anymore. She actually has friends. And I think she's adopted all these little children as her own. And all of this is thanks to you, Three, and your family."

Eric smiled. He remembered how, the first time he'd met Jordan's mom, he had felt a strong need to step in and help the situation. He hadn't really done anything, but his father had made a huge impact. And his mom had befriended Jewell and taken her under her wing. How grateful he was to them. His eyes moved to Jordan. Every time he looked at her, his heart swelled with emotion. They'd known each other ten weeks, but it felt as if he'd known her forever.

She smiled at him. "What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking about how much I love you. I was thinking that your face is almost healed. I was thinking that your hair has grown longer and that it is really pretty tonight the way it's shining in the lights. And I was thinking of kissing you."

"Kissing me? Here, in sight of all these people?"

He grinned. "Let's do an experiment. I'm gonna lean over and kiss you. A real kiss. A long kiss. And let's see if we make the news or at least go viral."

She smiled. "Well, I would never turn down one of your kisses."

"Good to know," he murmured as he reached out and placed his fingers

under her chin, turned her face toward him, and leaned over to kiss her.

The kiss was soft and deep and long, just as he'd promised. She momentarily thought about pulling back when she thought they were done, but he pulled her closer and continued, slanting his head, and she had no problem with that. After a long while, he slowly relinquished the kiss, pulled back, and smiled at her. "That should do it."

She giggled.

They both turned their heads back to watch the fight when Sarah got hit hard by her second opponent in the third round.

"Uh oh, she was doing so well," Jordan said.

Eric smiled. "She's okay. She's already won the first two rounds. As long as she stays up for the next minute, she'll win."

She did and the fight ended and her hand was raised as the winner.

The announcer came back into the ring and Sarah was presented with a beautiful trophy. She and her opponents were quickly interviewed and then a local cheerleading team entered the floor, followed by a large group of acrobats, demonstration teams, stunt duos, and board breakers, all of whom sat on the floor off to one side of the ring. The cheerleaders did a cheer for each side of the arena and were followed immediately by one of the martial arts demo teams.

Bree turned to Jeffy. "Remember at the first Challenge and you wanted to be a cheerleader so bad?"

Jeffy laughed. "I remember, and you were so sweet to indulge me."

"I remember too," Ricky said. "I remember the little outfits you wore."

"Who could forget those?" Toby added with a smile.

Caroline giggled. "That seems like forever ago."

"Fun times," Toby said. "Though, it wasn't so fun for you that year, Rick."

"It was a tough year, but also an awesome year. Bree and I got together and got married. We got pregnant with young Eric and you guys were pregnant with Brody and Beth was pregnant with JoJo. We survived a bunch of bad stuff, yeah, but Tommy went to jail for life, so that was good."

They all nodded as their minds went to the hard things that happened. But no one spoke them.

"What bad things happened?" Jewell asked.

"So many," Bree answered her. "Ricky was kidnapped and tortured. Jeffy was briefly taken, much like Josie was this year. Mom broke her leg, I was shot in the chest, Mom's bodyguard was murdered and Jeffy's bodyguard was severely injured in a car accident. And Eric, not my young Eric but Eric Sr., well, a bad man messed with his brain, but that's a story too long to tell here. It was a hard year, but also many good things happened too."

"Kind of like this year," Jewell said. "I mean, young Eric was kidnapped, Josie was taken, Jordan was hurt and drugged, but Jordan and Eric are now a couple, my life has completely changed, Peter can never hurt us again thanks to Eric, those two kids over there are no longer homeless thanks to you all, my two kids have never been happier, and we've been shown that God is so good."

Ricky and Bree both smiled.

Jewell went on. "And here I am, chatting with new friends, holding this gorgeous girl on my lap and I am so happy. Life can be hard, but it can also be so good."

"The hard things make us appreciate the good, teach us, and make us strong," Ricky said.

The group quieted and watched the entertainment for a while. As it came to an end, Ricky rose and kissed his wife, Grandmaster Kino rose and kissed his children and asked them to be obedient to their mother, then kissed his wife. Young Eric rose and kissed Jordan. Gabe rose to shake young Eric's hand. Taylor hugged her brother and told him to kick butt. Logan rose and hugged him. Joey and Cam both rose and kissed their wives. Jason and Justin rose to bow to young Eric and told him to be strong. Everyone else waved and smiled and admonished him to do well.

Young Eric, his father, his grandfather, his Uncle Joey and Uncle Cam made their way back to the locker rooms to work on his second warm-up. The younger-division preliminary male fighters, Caleb Rice and his two opponents, were entering the arena. It wouldn't be much longer before young Eric took the ring and tried to prove that he absolutely could follow in his father's footsteps.

✝✝✝

Jeffy and her best friend, Kimmie, sat together chatting. They appeared to be having a quite serious conversation and Kimmie's husband, Jensen Deal, couldn't help but overhear.

Kim was the only child of Jason and Angel Lee. Jason was Korean and Angel was a blonde-bombshell Southern belle from Alabama. Kim had long straight dark brown hair, hazel eyes, golden skin, beautiful lips, high cheekbones and was two years younger than Jeffy. Kim had been one of the few people who could put up with Jeffy's genius mind when she'd been an awkward child with a grown-up mind in a child's world. Kim loved Jeffy. Jeffy loved Kim.

Jensen, an Ameritech agent, had defied his boss, Jason Lee, by secretly dating Jason's daughter. Jensen was also of mixed descent. Biracial—white and Black, Jensen had dark curly hair, brown skin and green eyes. He was very good friends with Joey. When Chief Director Lee caught Jensen and Kimmie making out in Grandmaster Kino's study, he went after him. Joey intervened and had been thrown across the room. It was a story they loved to tell at family gatherings.

Now, both Jeffy and Kimmie were pregnant, both due near the end of November, within a week of each other, and both very much looking forward to becoming mothers.

"Just think," Jeffy said. "Ten years ago we were just teenagers and here we are about to be responsible for another human being."

Kim nodded. "Those ten years have flown by and I've changed so much. I was such a silly girl when I was a teen. Shopping, boys, martial arts and church. In that order."

Jeffy laughed. “You were not as shallow as you paint yourself, Kimmie, so stop. And you were the best friend to me.”

“Well, it was easy to be the friend of such a remarkable person, Jeffy. Ten years ago you were like, working on your second PhD. You were taking the world by storm.”

Jeffy sighed. “Ten years ago I was so in love with my boyfriend and didn’t know that two years later he would break up with me and break my heart. And you were by my side through all of that.”

Kim hugged Jeffy. “Bless your heart, you were so pitiful. But ya know, I really think it went down exactly the way it was supposed to go down.”

“What do you mean?”

“When Cam left, well, you focused yourself completely on your life’s calling—your mission. You threw yourself into it. And at the same time, he was throwing himself into his life calling. It was like you both had to go through that time before you could come together and be whole. That hard time made you reach out to God in a way that really brought you close to Him. Even when you were at your lowest, like, when you slept with that guy, God used that to wake you up. He helped you to see His gift of grace in a real sense.”

Jeffy looked into Kim’s beautiful hazel eyes. “That’s deep, Kimmie. Ya know, I still think about that dark time in my life and feel so much regret. I haven’t been able to forgive myself.” She patted her tummy. “I mean like, I hope my little guy never hears about my indiscretions.”

“You need to forgive yourself, Jeffy. We’re human. Well, you’re superhuman, but still, we’re not perfect. We need Jesus’ gift. He forgives us. So you have to forgive yourself. Heaven knows, I’ve done some pretty shocking things myself. But I’m human. We’re not perfect.”

Jeffy nodded. “The only perfect thing we can do is to strive perfectly to be perfect. And to perfectly repent when we mess up.”

Kimmie smiled. “You’re so smart.”

“I know, right!”

Kimmie laughed.

✝✝✝

Ricky opened the bathroom door and peered inside. His son stood over one of the sinks, both hands braced on the mirror in front of him, staring into his own eyes. “I found him,” Ricky said quietly to someone outside the door, closed the door and walked toward his son.

In the mirror, young Eric’s dark eyes shifted from his own reflection to his father’s.

“Son? You okay?”

He nodded. “Yes, sir. Just getting myself focused.”

“Nerves?”

“Not really. Feelin’ pretty intense.”

“Good.”

Young Eric pressed his lips together.

“Ya know, son, it doesn’t matter to me if you win or lose. In my eyes, you

can't fail because I'm already so proud of you."

Young Eric chuckled. "Thanks, Dad."

"What's so funny?"

"Granddad said the same thing to me."

Ricky shrugged. "I'm my father's son."

"I wish I was mine."

"What does that mean?"

"I mean, I'd like to measure up to you. Be as good as you. Be as strong as you. Be as perfect as you."

"I've shared with you the times I've fallen, Eric. And I'm thinkin' you won't make the same mistakes I've made. At least, I'm hoping. So that means you're actually already stronger than I was—better than I was. I've never seen anyone strive so hard to do the right thing. I'm so proud of you. And as far as I'm concerned, I think you have far surpassed me."

Young Eric sniffed back his emotions.

Ricky smiled and mussed his hair. "Come on, now, Eric, it's time to head out there and get this done."

Eric nodded and looked back into his own eyes in the mirror and nodded once more. "Let's do this."

✝✝✝

November 9th, Saturday Evening

Joe's Bar and Grill, Pine Forest, Georgia

Jericho Jones glanced over at the adorable blonde who was currently licking BBQ sauce off her upper lip. Her blue eyes glanced up at him and she smiled sheepishly. He smiled back. "You missed a spot." He reached over and used his thumb to wipe a tiny bit off her cheek.

She shrugged. "Sorry, but it's hard to be neat and tidy when you eat ribs, especially Joe's ribs," Rose said.

He nodded and glanced around at the place. It was packed. His five buddies, who were also his employees, were here tonight: Jimmy Callaway, Max Hooks, Luke Jackson, Micah Ferguson, and Jalen Shipley. Two of Rose's sisters, Daisy and Lily, were also there. A slew of other people that Jericho didn't know were there as well. Violet and CJ had opted to watch the big fight at the Tanners' home with Rose's mom, dad and little sister. He frowned as he thought about CJ. He still hadn't been able to really speak with him and find out why CJ had disappeared all those years ago and what was going through his head now. What had Jericho done to make the guy who'd been his best friend for almost his entire life refuse to even speak to him? He wondered if he had the facts wrong about what went down all those years ago.

"Whatcha thinkin' about, Jericho Jones, that has you looking so serious?"

He smiled at Rose. "Sorry. Thinkin' about CJ."

"Do you want to share with me what happened?"

He looked into her eyes. "Maybe."

Her eyebrows rose. "Really? I didn't expect that."

He smiled at her. "I think I can trust you with the facts. But this is not the

time and place to have such a long discussion. We'll do it soon. But there is something you have to promise me."

"What's that?"

"I know Violet's your twin, and I assume you two are very close?"

Rose nodded. "Very."

"So, the promise is a difficult one. I want you to promise me that you won't tell Violet what I tell you."

Rose frowned. "You want me to keep secrets from my sister?"

"The thing is, if CJ hasn't told her, there must be a good reason. And it wouldn't be right for me to come in here and ruin it. I'm sure he'll tell her when he feels the time is right."

Rose nodded. "That's the same thing my father says."

Jericho's eyes widened. "I guess your father knows what happened?"

She nodded. "Yes, and he assures me that neither of you have done anything wrong."

Jericho blinked but didn't say anything more. The place grew quiet as Josh Turner, the manager, turned up the volume on all the TVs and the announcer onscreen walked to the center of the ring.

✞✞✞

November 9th, Saturday Evening

Rosewood Sports Arena, Los Angeles, California

People were scrambling back to their seats from the restrooms and concession stands as the announcer made his way into the center of the ring. The rumbling of bass drums filled the arena as the Marine Division Drum Line made their way forward and performed a thrilling precision drum routine. Finally, they ended, dividing into two groups and lining up on either side of the pathway leading from the entrance to the ring. They stopped playing, came to attention, then simultaneously lifted their drumsticks into the air and angled them slightly forward to form an arch, once again imitating the arch of sabers.

The announcer began the introductions of the three opponents that young Eric would face. First was twenty-eight-year-old Cy Statten, a 4th degree black belt Taekwondo national champion. Second was thirty-year-old Dale Johnson, a former member of the military's special forces and 3rd degree black belt in both karate and jiujitsu. The third opponent was thirty-two-year-old Brevyn Ford, Master of Ford Martial Arts and a 7th degree black belt in Chun Kuk Do, and a 3rd degree black belt in both Tang Soo Do and Taekwondo.

He announced all of their masters and trainers as they lined up beside the fighters. There was a pause, and then he began speaking again. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, representing the Kino family in the Kino Challenge, we have a 3rd degree black belt in Zendo Ryu, which means he has achieved separate degrees in Tang Soo Do, Taekwondo, and in two forms of Karate. It also means he has trained in Muay Thai, Shaolin Kung Fu, and Krav Maga. He is the youngest competitor to ever compete in the top level of the Kino Challenge, twenty-year-old, Eric Kino the Third!"

The arena erupted.

"Eric is accompanied by his grandfather, Grandmaster Eric Kino, his father Grandmaster Eric Kino Jr., whom we all lovingly know as Ricky Kino, his uncle, and the reigning Kino Challenge Champion, Master Joey Adams, and his uncle, Master Cameron Wallace."

The crowd watched as young Eric and his entourage circled the ring, bowing to each of the opponents and their teams. The show of respect was always a stirring spectacle.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for our national anthem, which tonight will be sung by Gracie Nash and Logan Adams."

Logan and Gracie stood on the floor, each holding a microphone. Logan began to sing a cappella, and his clear, beautiful, full voice was mesmerizing. Gracie came in with harmony and together, they gave one of the best renditions of the National Anthem that anyone had ever heard as evidenced by the lengthy applause that followed.

The VIP section sat very still as they waited for the first fight to begin. Young Eric and Cy Statten moved to the center of the ring, bowed to the referee, and then bowed to each other.

Jordan felt like her heart might explode. Three had such an intense look on his face. She'd never seen him like that.

The fight began and thirty seconds later Gabe and Logan looked at each other with stunned expressions. Jordan's and Taylor's mouths opened in surprise. What in the heck had just happened? Not only had this never happened in a Challenge, but they'd never seen young Eric in this light. Even Ricky and Joey seemed surprised. Pleasantly surprised.

The rest of the family was on their feet, applauding, cheering, whistling for young Eric. Jordan whistled several times, then turned and threw her arms around Taylor. The arena was going crazy. Social media was blowing up, and the sports commentators were stunned.

"Well, folks, that didn't take long, did it? I guess we can all see that Eric the Third may be young, but he is not to be trifled with. Let's play that back."

Those watching TV were able to see that Cy Statten never stood a chance. He tried to throw the first punch, but young Eric ducked, punched, spun, kicked, punched again, and then came in with a double roundhouse kick. The kick to the head was blinding fast and so powerful that it knocked Cy out immediately. He was being tended to by the ringside physician. The crowd uttered a sigh of relief when he finally sat up.

Young Eric knelt beside him. "Hey Cy, you okay?"

Cy nodded.

The physician nodded permission and allowed Eric to help Cy up to stand.

Young Eric's hand was raised into the air by the referee and Eric immediately hugged Cy.

"Hey kid, you're no joke. Good job," Cy said.

"Thanks," Eric replied. He bowed to him and then went to Cy's master and trainers and bowed to each one before he returned to his corner.

"Good job, Eric," his grandfather said. "But don't get cocky. This next guy

is not gonna be that easy. Drink some water. You don't want to rest, do you?"

"No, sir."

"What's your next sequence?" Ricky asked.

Young Eric repeated it to him quickly. Ricky nodded and glanced at his father, eyebrows raised. Neither of them had expected Eric to be so focused. So intense.

He had to wait about five minutes before his opponent was set and ready to fight, because he hadn't expected to be called so quickly.

They came to the center of the ring and bowed. This guy, Dale Johnson, was former military. He was bigger than young Eric. Taller and heavier. During the first round neither one of them landed a punch or kick. But in the second round Eric's speed overcame the larger man's size and young Eric landed several hard kicks and a few punches and scored one take down. At the beginning of the third round, Dale knew he had to get back some points and came at Eric with everything. But Eric Sr. anticipated that and told young Eric to time it right and he'd have him. He did. This time he landed two lightning-fast, powerful kicks to the head and once again knocked out his opponent.

Again, the arena erupted and the enormous television audience and social media went crazy.

Young Eric paid his respects to Dale and his team and they came to do the same to the Kino team. Finally, Eric sat in his corner. "I need to rest this time," he said quietly to his grandfather.

While Eric rested, dancers from *America Can Dance* performed an amazing number and then Toby, Gracie and Logan sang a couple of additional numbers, with Logan at the keyboard and both Toby and Gracie on guitars. Once again, the audience was mesmerized.

Jordan leaned over to Gabe. "Eric's doing so good, isn't he?"

Gabe nodded. "Ya think? He's doin' great."

Taylor grinned. "I'm so proud of him."

"Me too," Jordan said softly.

"And Logan is doing great, too, isn't he?" Taylor said.

"Yeah, he is. He's so talented," Jordan said. "Both these guys. They're about to be big stars."

Gabe nodded. "They're rockin' it. Ya know, Logan is very cool. He recently told me that being a big star doesn't mean anything to him, and the only reason he wants to be a star is it gives him the influence and the opportunity to touch the lives of others with his music."

Taylor smiled. "Gabe, have I told you lately that I love you?"

He smiled. "That's cool, but I didn't say it, Logan did."

"And again. I love you. You are always so humble, and you always remember to put things in perspective. Can you be any more perfect?"

Gabe frowned. "So, do I come across as trying to be too perfect? Like some uppity goody-goody?"

"No, silly. You're just so adorable," Jordan said.

He sighed and shrugged. "Whatever. I'm gonna try not to be so adorable."

"Why?" Jordan asked.

"Cuz when you say that, it makes me feel weird."

Taylor and Jordan giggled. "And that makes you more adorable," Taylor said. "Oh, Gabe, I am so in love with you."

He sighed.

When the next fighter walked to center ring the crowd got silent. Gabe and Logan looked at each other. Fighting Brevyn Ford would be like fighting a young Grandmaster Kino. He owned his own martial arts chain. He was close to being a Grandmaster. Young Eric was gonna have to dig deep. And, Master Ford had just watched what Eric did to the other two opponents. He'll be ready. He'll be cautious and he'll be brutal. He'll make sure he doesn't make the same mistakes.

Still, young Eric had two grandmasters guiding him. That was an advantage. First round, young Eric held his own, which was actually a relief. That meant he had a chance against this master.

In the corner, young Eric was breathing hard. He drank some water, rinsed his mouth and spat into a bucket. Joey wiped his face. Grandmaster Kino frowned. He'd been watching his grandson, watching his face, watching his eyes, observing his body language. He hadn't smiled. Not even when he won the first two matches. It suddenly dawned on him what was going on. "We're gonna change up the sequence, Eric. I think I just realized what's going on in your head. I've decided you're not gonna bide your time. You're not gonna start with defense. You're gonna strike hard and fast and you're gonna get the heck outta that gold mine."

Surprised by the words, young Eric looked up briefly, then only nodded, his eyes looking straight ahead. That's exactly what he wanted to do.

Eric Sr. and Ricky eyed each other and nodded. "You're not going to the third round. This is it," Eric senior said.

Young Eric went out and fought for his life. He fought to save Josie. He fought to get back to Jordan. He fought to see his family. He fought for his brothers. His thoughts were way ahead of what Master Ford could compute. Eric came at him without having to think. Every offensive sequence was utilized. The movements leapt out of him automatically. His speed was unbelievable. His stamina was strong. His energy was high. Master Ford stumbled under the onslaught and young Eric whipped around and kicked twice, and the man went down. The crowd's roar was deafening. Eric bounced away and waited.

The crowd leapt to its feet when the ref called the KO. Eric immediately went to Master Ford's side to make sure he was okay and knelt while the physician checked him out.

Once the man was back on his feet the referee raised Eric's arm in the air. He took a deep breath and nodded, like he knew it was okay for him to breathe again. He finally smiled and turned and hugged Master Ford and then went to the Ford team and bowed to them and then met his own team center ring.

His father smiled at him and hugged him, lifting him up off the floor. His

two uncles hugged him, smacked his back, ruffled his hair, and then he turned to his grandfather. “Sir,” young Eric said reverently. “Thank you.” He bowed deeply. Eric senior returned the gesture and then smiled and hugged his grandson fiercely.

The announcer arrived at center ring. “Eric Kino, come talk to the world for a moment.”

Joey and Cam grabbed him and shoved him forward.

“Eric, do you have anything you’d like to say?”

He smiled. “I wanna say thank you to Master Ford for participating in the Challenge. He’s a beast. All three competitors tonight were, and I’m grateful for the opportunity to face them.”

He paused and took a few breaths. “I’m also grateful to my father and grandfather, who are so good at training and making their students believe in themselves. Mostly, I’m grateful to God. I always want to stay close to Him and do His will. He’s blessed me and I’m grateful.”

“Well, I think we can all agree that you did a great job tonight.”

“Thank you, sir.” He grinned. “I was worried that I was gonna be the first Kino to lose a Kino Challenge and I’m greatly relieved.”

The announcer and the audience laughed.

“Brevyn Ford,” the announcer motioned to the other fighter. “Please come join us, fine sir.”

Master Ford stepped up next to young Eric and put his arm around him.

“What would you like to say?”

“Well, like the other two fighters said who faced this guy,” he said as he squeezed Eric. “I’m humbled. I thought, I think we all thought, all right, this kid is only twenty years old and he’s only a 3rd degree black belt. Finally, someone might be able to take down the Kinos.”

The audience laughed again.

“But maybe the young age is to his advantage and not his detriment, and though he’s young, I think he’s the toughest competitor I’ve ever faced, and I’ve faced a lot of them.”

Eric looked up into the man’s face and nodded a ‘thank you’ for the compliment.

“And there you have it. Now, I’d like to introduce to you, Grandmaster Sun Chen, the president of the National Martial Arts Coalition.”

An older gentleman wearing a suit and tie stepped forward and took the offered microphone from the announcer. “Thank you. I’m honored by my dear friend, Grandmaster Eric Kino, to come here tonight to present the trophy to the winner of the Kino Challenge. After I do that, I have a special presentation to make, so everyone stick around.”

A young female black belt walked forward holding a large round crystal sphere attached to a marble base with a gold plaque engraved with “Kino Challenge Champion.” Inside the crystal sphere was a tiny replica of a tied black belt that encircled a ruby heart.

“I’ve always loved this trophy design,” Grandmaster Chen said.

"Grandmaster Kino says belts and trophies are just a small token of skills that a martial artist possesses and that the real black belt is what's inside the heart of the artist. I present this beautiful championship trophy to the youngest ever to possess it, Eric Kino the third."

Grandmaster Chen took the trophy from the young lady and handed it to Eric. They bowed to each other.

Another young black belt, this one a boy, walked into the ring holding another trophy. This trophy also featured a sphere, but this one looked like the world. The world was circled by a black belt and was held up by a large pair of golden hands. A second pair of crystal hands supported the golden hands, and the entire sculpture rested on a beautiful mahogany base with a gold engraved plaque.

Grandmaster Chen spoke again. "This next presentation is a Lifetime Achievement Award and was voted on by 4,000 members of the World Martial Arts Association. It is an award that we'd like to present to a very special man. A man we almost lost earlier this year."

In the audience, Gabe's eyes filled as he realized who they were talking about. The entire Kino entourage became filled with emotion and they all turned their eyes to Eric Sr. He stood calmly in the corner of the ring, his hands clasped behind his back. His face looking grim.

"This man is a Black Belt Hall of Fame inductee and a MART Grand Champion four times over. He is the founder of Kino Martial Arts, the force behind Ameritech Security, the philanthropist behind not only the three foundations mentioned earlier tonight, but more than twenty foundations worldwide. And those are just the ones we know about. He selflessly works behind the scenes every single day to do what we call, 'teach a man to fish.' He sets a perfect example every day of how a Christian man should live. He is devoted to God, to his family, to all of God's children, to his country, and to the world. He has used his knowledge and skill in the martial arts to touch the hearts of millions of people around the world. He will say that he's just a teacher, but I happen to know firsthand that he is so much more than that. When he was a little boy, he said he wanted to teach the world. Well he has indeed accomplished that. He teaches the world through example and the good works he does have affected millions of people."

Gabe looked again over at Grandmaster Kino, and saw him shake his head ever so slightly. Gabe thought that meant Grandmaster Kino either didn't agree with what the man was saying or he didn't like that the man was saying all of these things. Gabe was curious to see what Grandmaster Kino would say when he accepted the trophy.

"I could go on and on about this man's accomplishments but we'll run out of time. Earlier this year, back this past August, when I heard that Grandmaster Kino had been murdered, my heart was broken that he'd left this world without knowing how much we all love him and appreciate him for all the good he's done. When we joyfully heard that he'd survived, many of my associates came to me to get this process started.

"So, we would like to present this lifetime achievement award to a man who has, through the martial arts, brought healing and love to the world and has had a lasting impact on the people of this world. To a man who's done immeasurable good, and is my good and honored friend, Grandmaster Eric Kino, will you come forward and accept this?"

Grandmaster Chen motioned over to the corner to Eric senior. Eric drew a deep breath and came forward to accept the trophy. Grandmaster Chen bowed deeply. Eric accepted it and looked at it closely. He then stepped back and bowed to Grandmaster Chen.

"Please, Eric, say a few words."

Eric handed the trophy to Ricky and took the microphone.

"Well, this was a surprise," Eric said with a smile. "I really appreciate the sentiment behind the giving of this award. We always want to acknowledge those who do good in our world. And we want to do that so that it will encourage others to do the same, because if we all work together, we can do God's work: feed the hungry children, help the single moms, lift up the afflicted like the sick or people with disabilities or the homeless. We can work hard ourselves and teach others to work hard. We can fill our hearts with love and compassion."

He sighed. "Though, I have to disagree with this award, because I am no one special. I am not a big deal. I have many flaws and I have to work to overcome those flaws every day. Yes, I do try to do God's work here, but let's give all glory to God and not to me. So, I'll accept this award so that I can in turn offer this award to God, to my Father. Still, I am very honored by Grandmaster Chen and those who voted to give me this award. I'm humbled by that show of love.

"I'd like to express my gratitude. I'm grateful every day for the opportunity to serve others in any way that I can. I realize that may sound self-important but what I mean is, I'm alive and I can move around and speak and interact and I don't take those things for granted anymore. I'm grateful for my very lovely and very sweet and very strong wife and for my beautiful children, the new ones and the old ones, and for my family and friends. I'm grateful that they also work very hard to do God's will. So very grateful for that.

"So, really, this award goes out to all of you, all of you who continue to do God's work behind the scenes, where no one sees but God. You are the true heroes. I pray we will all continue to work hard and fill our world with love and kindness. However, I'm sorry, but I always add a qualification to that statement. We love people, but we can't and shouldn't love sin. Do not compromise with or tolerate evil. Love the sinner but not the sin. Keep that in mind as you go about your business of loving the world. It takes strength to keep that in mind because people don't want to be told that what they're doing is wrong. But truth is truth. And all we can do is tell the truth. What people do with that truth is, again, between them and God. Be strong, be in love, meaning, remain filled with love. Trust God."

He turned and smiled at Grandmaster Chen. "Thank you, Sun. Ya know I

love you, and ya know I'm gonna get you back for this."

Grandmaster Chen laughed. "I look forward to it."

The spectators stood and applauded. The Kinos waved, then left the ring with Grandmaster Chen. The announcer thanked everyone for an amazing night and said good night.

Young Eric immediately sought his girl. Jordan was struggling through the crowd to come down a few rows to get to young Eric. Gabe and Logan quickly helped by carefully and easily lifting her under each arm, over the row of seats to the floor and set her gently down in front of Eric.

He smiled down at her and then frowned. "Jordan? Why are you crying?"

"I'm just so happy for you, Three. You did it! You were so awesome up there tonight. You won—and I'm so happy for you."

"Aww, baby." He moved forward and took her face in his hands. "Were you worried?"

She laughed. "Yes. I'm sorry. I was. I knew how important it was to you. You said numerous times that you didn't want to be the first one in your family to lose a Challenge and I'm so proud of you and so..."

"Relieved," he finished for her with a grin.

She laughed. "Yes, I am so relieved. I mean, the day I met you on the highway and you took me to your mom's and sister's birthday party, that was ten weeks ago, and that same day, you were asked to compete. So, I've only known you under the pressure of training for the Challenge. And now, it's over. And you won. And you proved yourself to the world and I am so relieved and so happy."

He moved closer. "Well, I'm so sweaty and I'm sure I'm smelly, but I wanna kiss you."

"Please kiss me, Three."

He took her mouth. She threw her arms around his neck.

He pulled away. "It feels good doesn't it? I agree, there was a pressure there that's gone. And it feels so good to kiss you, to have you in my arms and there's nothing pressing except getting your foot better and helping you study for your exams."

She smiled. "I'm so happy. Thank goodness you kicked butt."

He laughed. "You really didn't think I would, did you?"

She shrugged. "I didn't know. I mean, the world was saying that you were young and untested and this would probably be the time that the Kinos don't actually win the Challenge."

"You can't listen to the media, babe. You should know that by now."

She nodded and turned as more members of the family moved forward to hug and congratulate him. He shook hands, accepted hugs and kisses. Both little Nate and Manny were lifted up into his arms for a few minutes. And then Angelina and Noah. And then Abe and Ledger, and then Emily and Kelstyn. His Aunt Breez and Aunt Bella hugged him. Aunt Jeffy moved forward with a smile and placed her hand on his face. "Eric, I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Aunt Jeffy," he said.

She frowned. “Are you in pain?”

Young Eric’s brows rose. “No.”

Jeffy looked to Jordan. “Are you?”

Jordan shook her head. “No, ma’am.”

Jeffy’s brow furrowed and then she smiled. “Oh! Well, I think it’s me.” She put her hand on her swollen belly. “Must be having some Braxton Hicks, though it seemed like it was someone else. Very strange.” She smiled. “So, are we going out to celebrate?”

Young Eric smiled. “We have a reservation for the party room at the *Bayside Grill*.”

“Fantastic! See you there.”

Gabe grabbed Eric. “Bro, I mean like, you rocked it! Do you realize you had three knockouts? Three! No one has ever done that! Master Joey had two knockouts a couple of times, but no one has ever done three! Young Eric, you are totally on my hero list!”

“Save that list for real heroes,” Eric murmured.

Taylor jumped up and hugged her brother. “Eric, OMG, I’m so happy. I was worried. And I thought Jordan was gonna break my hand she was squeezing it so hard!”

Young Eric glanced down at Jordan with his brows raised. “So, neither one of you had any faith in me?”

Taylor giggled and hugged him hard. “Oh shut up. We believed in you, but we love you so much, we still worried. I’m so proud of you, my big brother.”

Eric hugged her back. “Well, everyone, let me hit the shower and I’ll be right out.”

✝✝✝

Still Saturday Night...

Joe’s Bar and Grill, Pine Forest, Georgia

Rose was grinning from ear to ear. “That was so freaking awesome!”

“And to think,” Lily said. “Eric Kino used to flirt with me all the time.”

Daisy giggled. “You had your chance. Now, he’s found a girlfriend.”

Lily nodded. “He’s two years younger than me and the last time he hit on me, he was seventeen and still in high school and I was nineteen, so, like, awkward. But I tell ya, that is one really hot guy.”

Jericho smiled and glanced around at his buddies. He knew what they were thinking. They were thinking that Lily was one really hot girl. She and her sister both of course, since they were identical twins.

“Well, that really hot guy will be here in a few weeks,” Daisy reminded Lily. “Because they’re all coming for Thanksgiving.”

Jericho grinned as that statement prompted Micah to make his move.

“So, Lily,” Micah Ferguson began. “You’re twenty-two?”

She smiled and nodded. “Yes, and I’ll be twenty-three in a month.”

He smiled. “Cool. Well, although I’m no Eric Kino, I *am* older than you—by three years, so, whaddya say you let me take you to dinner next Friday night?”

Rose immediately turned and looked the guy over. He was a good-looking guy. Black hair. Blue eyes. Strong jaw. Not as big as Jericho. Maybe about the same as her brother. About six feet, and muscular. His coloring was actually a lot like Gabe's. Though Gabe's hair wasn't black; it was a dark brown. Micah was an employee of Jericho's, so Rose supposed he was probably a good guy.

Lily smiled at him. "Well, I guess we could do dinner."

Micah handed her his phone. "Let me get your number."

Lily put her number in and handed his phone back to him.

Micah smiled and held his phone up for all to see. "And that, my friends, is how it's done," he gloated.

Everyone laughed.

✝✝✝

Matthew 6:1

"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men,
to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward
of your Father which is in heaven."

Chapter Twenty-One

November 9th, Saturday Night
Bayside Grill, Newport Beach, California

Cal and Ellie Vaughn, owners of the *Bayside Grill*, looked up with bright smiles as the large party came in the door. The patrons who were there all stood and applauded as young Eric led the Kino group through the restaurant. He smiled and nodded and thanked people for their kindness, stopping to shake a few hands and sign a few autographs.

They made their way to the far-right rear of the restaurant and through double French doors into a large space with long tables set up in a U shape.

He handed the last autograph back to a patron and caught up to Jordan. "Sorry, Jordan."

She smiled at him. "Don't be sorry. I imagine this is how it's gonna be for you. I'm happy for you. And if I wasn't so incapacitated, I'd stay by your side to support you."

He drew a deep breath. "The movie comes out next month, before Christmas. If it does well, stuff like this could be crazy for a while."

"Well, hopefully I'll be too busy with my softball season to even notice."

He nodded. "Hopefully."

Servers came into the room immediately to get drink orders and set the pre-ordered appetizers on the table. The *Bayside* was one of the restaurants Ricky had invested in, and later helped its owners expand. The food was good, clean, and healthy. The bar was enormous, and it was a good place for celebrations. The party room was added later, when they realized people wanted a place to go to after events, a place still open with room for large groups. Ricky was talking to Jewell, pointing things out to her and assuring her that her restaurant was going to be just as successful.

The children's food was also pre-ordered and brought in immediately. Once everyone else had given their food orders, Grandmaster Kino called the group to order. "So, everyone, it's almost ten o'clock and the kids are tired and as soon as their bellies are full, they're gonna pass out. So, Shelley and I are gonna head out early, as soon as we have a bite to eat, so I just want to say thanks to you all. And again, Eric, congratulations for a battle well fought. I'm proud of you. Now, you've already heard from me tonight, so I'm gonna give someone else a chance to speak. I love you all." He sat down.

Joey rose. "Well, Eric, ya know, we don't ever get tired of hearing what you have to say. But I just wanna say a few things. First, to my nephew, man, you really tore it up tonight. I realized you were fighting an inner battle once

your grandfather pointed out what was going on. I get it. I hope you feel cleansed and fresh and ready to move forward now. I'm happy to relinquish the championship to you. I hope you think about continuing in future Challenges. But as for tonight, my man, that was a helluva good job." He raised his glass. "To young Eric."

Everyone raised a glass and the kids giggled, having fun clinking their glasses of water together.

Ricky stood next. "Well, of course I want to say how proud I am of my son." He nodded. "Really proud, Eric. You worked hard, you gave it your all. I commend you." He lifted his glass. "To Eric." They drank and he continued. "I also wanna address a few others. Logan, Grace and Toby, good grief you guys are gifted. Logan and Grace, I don't think I've ever heard a better rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner*. You were mesmerizing."

"Hear, hear," several people called. "To Logan and Grace."

"Well," Grace said. "It's Logan who is so good and I'll sing with him anytime, anyplace. And just so you know, I'm already trying to talk him into doing an album with me."

Logan grinned and looked at Melody sitting beside him. She smiled up at him. He looked back at Grace. "Let's try to find some time this coming year to make that happen."

"And I just wanna say one more thing," Ricky added. "Dad." He stopped and got his emotions under control. "You'd only been out of the hospital a day. One day—when we met together during Bree's and Taylor's joint birthday party and decided to ask young Eric to compete. And throughout this whole ten weeks, not once did you say one thing about being weak, or tired, or incapacitated. Not only did you work tirelessly to train Eric and Gabe, but you worked hard to get your own body back into good working condition. You also took care of your family. Helped Shelley through some struggles. Took care of your new children. Counseled many of us. Planned and arranged sparring days and supported Taylor's new love of volleyball.

"I know you don't want praise and accolades for doing those things, but I just want to point out the example you've set for the rest of the family. Because if any of us could be even close to how you serve us all, then that would be an amazing accomplishment. Forgive me for this, Dad, but I'm still traumatized by almost losing you twelve weeks ago. It now seems like a distant memory. But it's only been twelve weeks. And look at you. You're back in shape. Maybe not completely, but so close. Dad, I'm so proud of you. And I'm so grateful to you for who you are and what you've taught all of us, not just me." He raised his glass. "To my dad."

Everyone stood reverently, raised their glasses and drank.

The food arrived and while they ate, several other people took a turn to address the family. Toby spoke of his deep and abiding friendship with Ricky, who was so much like his father. Justin spoke of his longtime friendship with Eric. Cam spoke of how Grandmaster Kino had become like a father to him and had changed his life. Jeffy spoke of her training when she fought in the

Challenge and how her father gave her complete confidence. Mickey spoke of her husband Jeff and the entire Kino family and how much they helped her overcome her traumas. Bella and Breez both spoke of Shelley and how she was just like her husband, always serving, always helping. Bree seconded that. Logan also spoke of the entire family and then held his phone up for all to see.

"Hey, everyone," JoJo and Mark said together. "Just wanted to say congrats to the champ there and we love you all and miss you all."

"Did you win?" Jordan asked.

"We did," JoJo answered.

"Good job!" "Way to go!" "All right!" everyone called out.

The family got quiet when one of the new members of the group stood up. The small woman stood, wringing her hands. "May I say something?" she asked quietly.

"Of course," Bree said quickly.

Jewell smiled. "I just wanna say, I can't thank you people enough for how you've come into my life and changed my world." She turned to young Eric. "You came into our home with all of your love and kindness and for the first time ever, I felt the safety and strength of a true man. A male presence that I've never felt before. My own father was weak. My first husband was sick and physically weakened by his illness. My second husband was weak and eventually that weakness turned into evil. But you, Eric, you were strong and confident and powerful and kind. So very kind to me and my children. And then you introduced me to your father, and I understood where you got that from. And your mom, she is the best friend that anyone could have. And your sister who befriended my children and cared for them and unselfishly made my daughter Josie feel like she was important and my daughter Jordan feel like a true sister. And then I met your grandfather, and he counseled me, and he counseled my Josie and my Jordan, and again, I see where it comes from. My life has changed. I feel light. And happy. And hopeful. And like God is real. And all of that is because of you coming into our lives and the way your family serves the world and teaches the world. Do you see how much you teach and change the world just through your example? I love you all so much. And I just thought I should stand and let you know that. And I'm a very shy person, so you have to know that this is an amazing thing I'm doing."

"Oh, you're gonna do more amazing things than this," Bree said.

The group chuckled and nodded.

Alec then stood and spoke and pretty much echoed what Jewell said. The Kinos were exponentially changing the world.

Desi then gasped just as Alec finished speaking. He glanced down. She was looking at her phone. She looked up at him, her eyes filled with tears. The rest of the group waited.

Jeffy asked, "Desi? Are you okay?"

Desi nodded and held up her phone. "I just got a text. And it's," she stopped, sniffed, and went on. "It's from my father." She looked at Alec and then at Ricky. "It says, *Destiny, I'm reaching out to you. I would like to see*

you. I want to apologize. Will you come to the house tomorrow?"

Jordan looked up at young Eric with a smile.

Eric smiled and so did Ricky and Bree.

"Desi, that is wonderful," Bree said. "So, are you going?"

"Of course," she said with a huge smile. She quickly texted him back.

~~yes daddy what time?

~ At 1:00. After church for lunch. And bring Alec if he'll come.

~~we'll be there (heart emoji)

She looked up and read the rest of the texts to everyone. "It's like a miracle," she cried.

"It is definitely God's work," Ricky said softly.

A server came in to see what was needed and take orders for dessert. Once she left Jason spoke. "Well, this has been an extraordinary night. So many good things happening and our hearts are obviously full. I too am full of gratitude for each of you. I just want to pass along some information to you. The two kids young Eric and Logan caught yesterday were doing mean TikTok challenges. Mr. Cobb has decided to press charges. Not because he's angry, but because they've targeted him several times and he thinks it's the only way they'll learn a lesson. So, Jordan, you are welcome to jump on the bandwagon. If you do, you lend more weight to Mr. Cobb's concerns. Both of you could've been badly hurt. He could've hit his head and you could've tumbled down the stairs and broken your neck. So, we'll need a decision. The parents are still very angry. Not with their children but with us for kicking them out of the arena.

"Both of the Duprees have been temporarily removed from the board until the board can convene and do it properly. Now, as for the concessions supervisor, he's been fired. It didn't take much digging to find that he's been fining the vendors and concession workers and pocketing the money."

Eric senior shook his head. "I'm not sure how this happened, but we have to do better. We own the majority of that complex and we can't let something like a few bad apples ruin our good name."

Justin nodded. "We do have to do better. And what happened is one of the board members died and his children sold off the shares through improper channels. All it takes is one irresponsible person on the board who allows one bad hire and the place can go downhill fast. I suggest we set up a series of checks and balances before anything like this happens again."

"I thought we had those checks and balances," Eric said.

"We'll make better ones," Justin offered.

"Well, anyway. This is not a place for this discussion." Eric senior glanced at Gabe. "Gabriel Tanner, we haven't heard from you."

Gabe smiled. "Um, well, I figured I hogged the light yesterday. This is my brother's night." He grinned. "But as long as you called on me..."

They all chuckled.

"I just wanna say how much I love you guys. I love sitting here listening to you all interact with each other. I always find it really interesting, and

informative and always inspiring and heart-warming. I'll just add my congrats to this beast over here. I mean, Eric, you slayed it. Three knockouts. So cool. And I can't say that without saying how great your teachers are—your dad, your granddad, your uncles, everyone. So awesome." He shrugged. "That's all I got," he said with a frown.

"Well that was plenty," Taylor said with a giggle.

Gabe's brow furrowed. He gripped his stomach and gave a soft moan.

Taylor looked at him. "What's wrong?"

"I dunno. Weird pain, like cramps."

At almost the same time, Jeffy also frowned and put her hand on her abdomen. She was breathing hard.

"Jeffy?" Cam asked. "Are you feeling Gabe's pain?"

She nodded but then shook her head as she moaned.

"No, she's not," Gabe finally said. "I'm feeling her pain."

Shelley's eyebrows rose. "Jeffy, are you in labor?"

"Uh, ya know what? I think I am! All night long I thought I was feeling everyone else's discomfort. But, I guess it's been me. It's strange though, it's like it feels so separate from myself. Like it's not really me."

Cam looked at his watch. "Has it ended yet?"

Jeffy blew out a breath and nodded. "Yeah."

"Honey, how long has this been going on?"

Jeffy shrugged. "Pretty much all day. But I'm not sure I'm actually in labor. Maybe just some Braxton Hicks."

"Honey, you told me that those don't hurt. You were in pain just now."

"Was I? Not really."

"Yes really," Gabe said. "That was some intense pain."

"So, Gabe," Logan began. "Do you think you're becoming like, psychic, I mean, like Jeffy?"

"Um, no. I don't know what's happening to me, but I'm not like Jeffy. I can't just go into people's minds and talk to them. But every once in a while I see something or dream something. But this, uh, this feeling her pain thing, uh, that's new. So, I don't know what's happening."

Bree pulled out her cell. "I'm gonna call the midwife now, because she's a good thirty minutes away."

"Well, Eric, if Jeffy's going into labor, we need to finish up here and get these kids home and into bed," Shelley said. "So that I can be free to tend to her until the midwife gets to the house."

Eric was thinking. Something significant was happening if Gabe was picking up on it.

"Eric?" Shelley said again.

He snapped out of it and smiled and nodded. "Just let me do something real quick." He stood and walked around the table to Jeffy and laid his hands on her head. "Cam? Join me?"

Cam stood.

"Pull her chair out from the table," Eric ordered.

Cam did so.

"Ricky? Joey?"

They both stood and all of them circled around Jeffy.

Both Jeffy and Gabe moaned again. Cam looked at his watch. "It's only been three minutes."

"Good grief," Gabe said. He was breathing hard. "I gotta get outta here. How do you women do this?"

The women giggled. "Bless his heart," Bree said. "Can you block it?"

"I don't know how to block it," Gabe said with a groan. He groaned a few more times. "It's starting to ease up."

Jeffy giggled. "It's not that bad to me. I'm barely feeling it. Maybe Gabe is absorbing the pain for me."

"Is it over?" Eric asked.

Jeffy nodded. He put his hands on her head. Cam, Ricky, and Joey did too. Eric blessed her in Jesus' name. He called for both Jeffy and the baby boy to be healthy and strong and protected from any dark forces. He called for no complications, and he asked for protection. He called down the light of Christ to surround them.

Jeffy suddenly felt transported to another world. These strong, spiritual men were surrounding her, blessing her, protecting her. For a moment, she felt as if she had been carried into heaven. It was beautiful and peaceful and there was no fear or sadness. Only love and joy. She saw many spirits or angels or beings of light or something, both male and female and she had a knowing that she was looking at spirits who were waiting to be born into their family. One male spirit in particular smiled at her and gave her a thumbs up. And then suddenly, the blessing ended and she was back in the chair in the restaurant.

As soon as the blessing ended, everyone began gathering purses and cell phones. Ricky paid the tab.

"Miss Shelley?" Melody said. "Do you want me to come to the house and get the kids to bed for you so that you and Mr. Kino can do what you need to do for Jeffy?"

Shelley nodded. "That would be great. But be sure to call your parents and let them know why you're so late."

Melody immediately pulled out her phone. But everything stopped when Cam helped Jeffy to stand. The moment she stood up, there was a splash on the floor. Her water broke.

"Uh oh," Jeffy said. She doubled over. "Oh no, I think the baby is coming right now."

"Well, so much for a home delivery," Shelley said.

"We have stuff in the car in case she went into labor somewhere other than home," Cam said. "I'll be right back."

The owners of the restaurant came running to see what they could do and were told to simply keep everyone away for a while.

Grunting, Gabe dropped to his knees. "Good grief, I gotta get outta here. I can't stand it."

Young Eric and Logan grabbed Gabe under his arms, pulled him up and took him from the restaurant. They dragged him all the way out into the far end of the parking lot.

"Better?" young Eric asked.

Gabe nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

Inside the restaurant, the women gathered around Jeffy as she knelt on the floor on the blankets and pillows Cam brought in.

No one panicked. Jeffy was a doctor; Cam, Joey, Jason and Ricky were all certified EMTs; and Lori Lee was an APRN. More importantly, Jeffy and Cam had been working with the midwife and watching home-birth videos in preparation for the all-natural home birth they'd envisioned. Bree was on the phone with the midwife while Angel called 911 in case there were any complications. They weren't going to attempt to move Jeffy now. She was gonna have a baby at the famous Bayside Grill.

"I'm sorry everyone," Jeffy said. "I can't believe it didn't hurt more. I mean, I only felt a little bit of cramping."

"It's okay, baby," Cam said softly. "We got this."

Eric senior spoke. "To protect Jeffy's privacy, we men will turn our backs. Cam, if you need assistance, Ricky will help you. Just call him. Ladies, do what you want. I know Jeffy won't mind if you stay and watch the miracle about to take place or leave if you need to.

"I'll take the children out," Melody said quickly.

Eric nodded. "Thank you. Here are the keys to the car. It's kind of cool out there for them, so you can get them into their car seats."

"Yes, sir." She smiled. "Come on, kiddos. Let's go find Logan and young Eric and Gabe."

"I'll help," Bella said. "Come on, Em."

"I will too," Breez said as she lifted Ledger. "Sophia, grab Kel's hand and follow me."

"Boys," Jeff said to his sons. "Go out in the parking lot and stay with Gabe and the guys."

"Yes, sir," Daniel said quickly.

"I'd like to stay and watch, Jeffy, but I need to sit," Mickey said softly.

Jeff immediately grabbed a chair and set it so Mickey could sit and still be able to watch the birth of the baby. Mickey was due in about four weeks herself and she wanted to watch a birth from a different perspective other than the person giving birth.

Jewell chose to leave the room, taking Josie and Jamie with her. Jordan found a chair and sat. No way was she gonna miss the birth of Dr. June Flower Kino's baby. She knew she would treasure this experience always.

Jeffy moaned as the next contraction hit. Kimmie knelt down by her. "This is so like you, Jeffy," she said softly, making Jeffy giggle.

Cam helped Jeffy remove her clothes from the waist down and asked Jeffy to let him see what was happening. She lay down and allowed him to look.

"Well," he said with a smile. "Our son has a head full of dark hair."

Jeffy smiled, and then groaned as the next contraction hit. "Oh Lord, now this one hurts. Oooohhhh, hurts bad." Cam helped her as she struggled back into a squatting position.

Lori knelt down next to Cam. "Jeffy, you know how to breathe. Breathe and relax your body. Come on. Breathe with me."

Jeffy nodded and breathed.

Shelley wiped a cool cloth over Jeffy's face. "You're doing so good, sweetie. I'm so proud of you. It won't be long now and you're gonna be holding your sweet baby boy."

Jeffy smiled. "Mom, you had me in a ranger's station. I guess this sort of fits the way we do things."

Shelley smiled sweetly. "I guess it does."

Filled with emotion, Taylor knelt down on the other side of Jeffy. "Aunt Jeffy. I love you so much."

Jeffy's eyes filled with tears. "Aww, Taylor, I love you too. You're gonna have a new cousin any minute."

"I know and I'm so glad you didn't send me away. This is the most beautiful and amazing thing I've ever seen."

Jeffy let out a long growl. "Cam, I need to push."

He nodded. "Go ahead. Push with your next contraction."

She did, and with one powerful push, the baby's head emerged. A minute later, Elijah Cameron Kino Wallace was born into this earthly realm.

Cam caught him and wrapped his son in clean white towels. Jeffy lay down and Cam gently laid the child skin-to-skin on his mother's chest.

The people who'd stayed in the room during the birth felt what seemed like a warm breeze swirl around them and heard what they would describe later as a soft whisper of love.

Jeffy peered into the face of her baby boy. He wasn't crying. He only made soft baby sounds as he slowly stretched and moved around. Jeffy knew he was just fine. Perfectly healthy. He was so beautiful. His eyes blinked at her and seemed to focus on her, looking into her soul. "Oh, sweet boy," she murmured.

Cam leaned over and placed a kiss on his wife's forehead and then on his son's head as well. "I promise before you and God and everyone here, that I will never abandon you like my own dad did me. I will never leave you. And I will try with everything in me to be a good father, and I'll follow the examples set by the men in this room."

There wasn't a dry eye in the place.

✝✝✝

Out in the parking lot, Bella and Breez put their kids into their cars and turned on some soft music.

Logan saw that Melody was tasked to get the five Kino children into the vehicle and went to help her.

"Hey, Melody. Let me help you."

She smiled as she brushed some of her hair out of her face so that she could see to fasten Angelina's seat belt. "Thanks, Logan."

"I don't wanna get in the car," Nate complained.

"Hey, buddy, it's late and you should be in bed asleep right now, but since your bed isn't here, you gotta get in your car seat."

"If you all get in your car seats and say a prayer for your sister Jeffy and her baby, then I'll tell you the rest of the story we started yesterday," Melody said.

Logan lifted Nate into his seat and fastened his belt. "Who's next?" he said quickly.

"Me," Noah said, lifting his arms up toward Logan.

Melody then lifted Abraham, while Logan grabbed Manny.

"There," Logan said with a nod of his head.

"Who wants their blankets?" Melody asked.

"I do," both Angelina and Manny said.

She pulled their blankets out of a basket on the floorboard and tucked them around their little bodies. "There. Everybody comfy?"

Logan smiled at her. "Before you start the story, hold on just a second."

He ran to where the guys were standing. "Hey guys, Melody is gonna tell us a story."

"Really?" young Eric chuckled. "Well, this sounds like a real treat."

Young Eric, Gabe, Daniel, Jeremy, Jamie, Josie, and Logan walked back over to the Kino family's large van and stood around. Melody stood in one of the side doors. The others gathered near the opposite side door, the driver's door, and the passenger door.

"Okay, Melody," Logan said with a smile. "We wanna hear the story too. You can go ahead now."

She made a face and rolled her eyes. "Okay. Well, so, let's see. Where did we leave off yesterday?" she asked the children.

"It was pouring down rain," Nate said.

"And dey fell down on the swippery wet gwass," Angelina said.

"And dey swid aaaaallllll da way down the big hill," Noah added.

"And they couldn't go any farther when they got to the bottom of the hill because the gwound became a big wake," Nate said.

"Right. So what did I say they were gonna try to do?" Melody asked.

"Dey was gonna make a waft."

"What's a waft?" Manny said.

"Well, a raft is kinda like a boat, except it's flat. And it floats on the water so if the children could make one, they could sit on the raft and float across the big lake made by the rain," Melody answered.

"Show us a picture," Nate said.

"Okay, but before I show a picture, why don't you try to imagine it in your head. Listen to how I tell you they make it, and try to see it in your head, and then we'll pull up a picture and we'll see if it looks different from how you pictured it." She paused with a smile. "Okay, so, it was pouring down rain and the children ran down the hill, but it was raining so, so, so, so, hard that the green grass got slippery and they slipped and fell and slid on their bottoms the whole rest of the way down the hill. When they finally got to the bottom they

were..."

"How many children were there?" Gabe asked.

Melody smiled. "How many children were on the hill, Abe?"

He frowned for a minute, then looked up. "Fwee."

"Right. Okay, so they got to the bottom of the hill and..."

"I mean," Gabe went on. "I thought since there are five Kino children that there might be five of these kids." He raised his eyebrows.

Young Eric chuckled.

"Yeah, there should be," Daniel Davis said.

Melody raised her eyebrows right back. "Go ahead, Nate, and tell them why there aren't five kids on the hill."

He frowned. "Because two of dem was saying mean words to each other and dey didn't get to go outside to cwimb da hill."

"Yeah," Angelina said. "Dey had to go to deir woom and sit and fink about how dey could be nice to each uhver and de uhver children got to go outside and cwimb da hill."

"Yeah," Noah said. "And it was weally sad cuz all da chidwen weally woved to cwimb da hill and watch da magic cwouds be aminals but dey didn't get to go because dey wouldn't stop being so mean."

Logan smiled. "So, you think if they had stopped saying mean things they may have been able to go?"

They all nodded.

"Any more questions, Gabe?" Melody asked.

He shrugged. "Not presently."

"So, the children got to the bottom of the hill and they saw that it had rained so much that the whooole field that they had walked across earlier was now a giant lake! Oh no, how in the world are they gonna get home? Then one child, his name was Noah, said, 'I know! We'll build a raft!' 'How do you build a raft,' Angelina asked. 'You take a bunch of sticks and tie them together,' Noah said. 'We can use my sticks,' Emmanuel said, because he remembered that when they were walking across the field earlier, he collected sticks and laid them down when they started climbing the hill."

Melody clapped her hands together. "So, they went to the place where Emmanuel put the sticks, and sure enough, there they were! Together the children took all the sticks and laid them side by side. There must have been hundreds of sticks."

"How did one little kid find and carry hundreds of sticks in his little hands?" Gabe asked.

Melody glared up at him, making everyone chuckle. "Because Emmanuel was super strong—because—each of the children had one superpower."

"They do?" Nate asked.

"They do now," Melody grumbled.

"So, now that the hundreds of sticks are all laid out straight, what are they gonna use to put them together?" Gabe asked.

Melody's eyes narrowed. "Well, it just so happens that Angelina's

superpower is her hair. She can pull one hair out of her head and make it as long as she wants it to be and it never ever breaks unless she wants to break it. So, all she has to do is pull one hair out of her head."

"So, what are the other—"

Logan put Gabe in a headlock and young Eric slapped his hand over Gabe's mouth. They pulled him away. "You're outta questions, bro."

Melody went on to tell the children how they put the raft together and how it looked. Once she finished describing the raft in detail, she asked Logan to pull up some pictures of rafts on his phone.

The children passed the phone around, studying the pictures.

"So, did the raft you thought about in your head match any of the pictures you just saw?" she asked the children.

"No," Angelina said softly.

"What was different?" Melody asked.

"They was all ugwy and mine was pink and pwetty."

The guys standing around chuckled.

Young Eric pulled out his phone when it vibrated. He read the text. "Well, everyone, we now have another cousin and you kiddos have another nephew."

"The baby comed out of Jeffy's tummy?" Noah asked.

"Yes, it did," Eric said.

Gabe blew out a sigh of relief.

A few minutes later the midwife and paramedics arrived and about fifteen minutes after that, the rest of the family began coming out of the restaurant.

Everyone started hugging one another and saying good night. Jeffy was one of the last to be brought out. She was loaded into the ambulance, which was there only to transport her and the baby safely home.

Logan watched as Melody said her good nights to the children and to his grandparents and started toward her car. Logan caught his grandfather's eye. "I'll take care of it," Logan said. He ran after Melody. "Hey, Melody, hold up."

She turned with a sweet smile on her face. "Whatcha need, Logan?"

"Hold on a minute and let me follow you home."

"That's not necessary."

"Well, it may not be, but it's after midnight and we'll all feel better if I make sure you get home safely."

She shrugged. "Okay, if you insist."

"So, let me go tell my mom and grab my car. Be right back."

She gave a soft laugh. "Okay."

He turned and ran after Bella. "Hey, Mom!"

She turned from getting Emily into her car seat. "What's up, Logan?"

"Just letting you know that I'll be home soon. I'm just gonna follow Melody home to make sure she gets in okay and then I'll be right home."

"Okay, sweetie, thank you for doing that."

He rolled his eyes. "Well, the pleasure is literally all mine."

Bella smiled. "So, are you two, like, a thing?"

He shook his head. "No. Well, at least not yet," he said with a twinkle in his

eye. "I'll be home soon. You be careful when you get home and look around before you get out of the car. And also make sure the garage door is all the way down before you get out of the car."

"I promise," she said without argument. She knew he worried about her. He'd saved her life when he was only eleven, and he was still very protective. And right now, with his father and brother out of state for JoJo's football game, he was even more protective.

Logan jumped in his red Range Rover Sport and pulled up behind Melody's car to wait for her to pull out.

Gabe grabbed Taylor firmly by the hand and pulled her toward his car. He caught her father's eye and pointed at her. Ricky nodded, giving his permission. Gabe almost dragged her over to lean against his car, then moved close and kissed her.

She grinned. "What was that for?"

"That was because I've been wanting to do that all night and I couldn't get you alone."

"Well, we've got from here to the house, which is about twenty minutes."

He smiled. "Well, it might take us a little longer." He pulled back and ran his hands over her hair. "So, did you see the baby being born?"

She smiled and nodded her head. "It was amazing, Gabe. I mean, like, wow. It's like, you know there's a baby inside, a person, a real person, but it gets much more real when they come out and you can hold them and see them with your own eyes. It was amazing. And you could feel his spirit. It was strong. When he was born, his spirit, it like, filled up the room. I can't wait to have my own baby."

He smiled at the thought. "You make me want to marry you tomorrow so we can just get started making babies."

She giggled. "Gabe. That is hot."

He nodded. "You're right, it is and I need to pull back a bit. I can't wait to be a full-fledged agent, making a living, doing what I need to do."

"Don't worry and don't rush. I'll be here for you when you're ready."

"Will you?"

"I can't imagine another guy better than you, Gabriel Tanner. I think the question is, will you meet a girl that makes you lose interest in me?"

He snorted. "So silly. I gave my life to save you. You're mine. You got that? Do you hear me?"

She grinned. "Loud and clear."

He opened the car door for her.

Young Eric pulled his car up to pick up Jordan as she exited the restaurant.

He jumped out and ran around to help her into the car. He helped her in and ran back around and climbed behind the wheel. Turning toward her, he smiled. "Hey, babe."

"Hey, Three."

"You look so beautiful right now."

She smiled. "I can't imagine that I do. I'm so sleepy and YOU have to be

exhausted."

He nodded. "I am. And all I can think about is getting home, and you sneaking into my bed tonight and letting me hold you all night long."

"Hmm, you've just been through a big battle. Are you sure you don't have that thing you and your dad were talking about when you got back from being kidnapped? That primal thing."

He grinned. "Nope."

"Nope, you don't have it?"

"Nope, I'm not sure. But at this moment, I don't care about anything."

She giggled. "Uh, I think you have it."

He smiled. "Maybe."

"Then your dad said I'm supposed to be strong for you."

"Okay. That's fine. You do that. Let's just see if your strength wins out over me seducing you."

Her eyes opened wide. "Eric Kino, you're scaring me."

He laughed. "I'm just kidding." He turned his head away. "Maybe."

"What?"

"Nothing." He put the car in drive and started moving. "So, did you get to see the baby being born?"

"I did. And wow. First, I mean, it looks impossible. And second, it wasn't at all like they portray it in the movies. Your Aunt Jeffy was so calm and cool, and she didn't scream and yell, and she pushed like, one time, and the baby came out. And Three, I mean, he was so beautiful, and so sweet, and so tiny, there was like this feeling, like, overwhelming feeling of love. It makes me wanna..." She stopped.

He grinned. "Wanna what?"

"Never mind."

He gave a knowing smile. She wanted to have his babies as much as he wanted her to have them. "Hold that thought," he said. "We'll make it happen." Soon, he thought. Very soon.

✝✝✝

Melody pulled into the driveway in front of her home. Logan pulled over in front and jumped quickly out of his car. She was getting stuff out of the backseat and startled as he approached.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. I was just gonna walk you to your door," Logan said.

"Oh, that's very sweet," she said with a smile. "But again, not necessary."

"Well, apparently it is, since I approached you before you even realized it. If I had been a bad guy, you'd be in big trouble right now."

She nodded. "I guess you're right." She stepped away from the car holding a gym bag, some shoes, and her purse. She looked him over. "So, Logan, you said you do all the martial arts stuff too, right?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"What belt are you?"

"Third dan. That means a 3rd degree black belt. Like Eric except not really

like Eric."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he'd already been a 3rd degree a year by the time I made mine."

"Why?"

"He and JoJo got an earlier start than me waaay back when we were kids and it's taken me a while to catch up."

"Why did they get an earlier start?"

"One, because they're a little older, and two, because I wasn't born into the family. I'm adopted."

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh! I didn't know that. I'm so sorry to like, grill you on it."

He smiled. "It's okay. I'm quite happy that I was adopted. My adoptive father is the best and my brothers, JoJo and young Eric and Gabe too, we're really close."

"I'm confused."

He laughed. "Well, JoJo is my actual adopted brother. He's Mark Adams' biological son. My mom is my biological mother and she married Mark Adams and he adopted me. So, JoJo and I became brothers. But JoJo and young Eric, though they are only cousins, always thought of each other as brothers, so I joined that brother club. And then there's Gabe. He's like, one of us, so he was adopted into our brotherhood."

"How cute," Melody said with a smile.

He rolled his eyes. He reached out to take the bag from her. "Let me carry that for you."

She allowed it. They started up the walk toward her front door.

He looked around. "Ya know, the Davis family only lives a couple of miles west of here."

"Really? Hmm, a couple of miles west are some really fancy neighborhoods."

He shrugged. "So, um, Melody, do you have plans to go to Alec and Desi's wedding this coming Saturday?"

"Well, I haven't really thought about it. I mean, really, I haven't actually been invited."

"Well, you are now. Invited, I mean." He sighed. "I mean, would you like to go to the wedding, like, with me?"

She stopped walking and thought about it as she looked up into his eyes. "You mean, like, a date?"

He nodded. "Yep, like that." He drew a deep breath because it felt like his heart was pounding out of his chest. He realized if she turned him down, it would be hard to ask again. But he'd do it. He wouldn't give up.

She frowned. "An actual date."

"Well, we've been out before," Logan reminded her.

"Yeah, but I mean, well, I went to see your gig at the coffee shop and that was nice, but I watched and went home, so I really wouldn't call that a date. And I went with you to watch Taylor's homecoming parade, and then I went

straight home. I wouldn't call that a date. But now, this sounds more like a date, and I'm wondering—do you think it's okay for me to go on a date with my employer's grandson?"

He nodded. "I don't see a problem."

"I can't afford to lose my job."

"I promise I won't interfere with your ability to do your job. Were you supposed to work Saturday?"

"No. It's just that, what if we go on a date and don't hit it off?"

"Oh, I see what you mean." He thought and then shrugged. "Well, if we don't hit it off, then we don't. I won't hold it against you and neither will my grandparents. You must know we're not that shallow. Besides, it's just a wedding. You won't even be alone with me. It's more like a group activity."

She smiled and nodded. "I, uh, guess I could do that. Just know that my job is very important to me."

He nodded. "Understood. And your job is very important to Grandma too. She went through dozens of people who applied for the job and just didn't feel right about anyone until she met you. She wouldn't want to lose you. She feels so blessed to be able to have you help her."

Melody smiled. "Miss Shelley is so sweet. I just love her."

Logan nodded. "Me too. So, we're on?"

She sighed. "I think so. I'll have to check with my dad, because he's already said that this next Saturday is gonna be a yard day."

"A yard day?"

"Yeah, you know, the final cutting of the grass, edging the yard, pruning back the trees, bagging the leaves, so everything looks nice for the winter, like, for Thanksgiving and Christmas."

He nodded. "Got it."

"But he'll probably let me out of it. Maybe I'll do my part in the evenings after I get home from work this coming week."

"Cool. Maybe I'll come help you."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know, but like my brother says, it's always good to be in service."

"Which brother is that?"

"Gabe."

"Oh yeah. I've heard him say that on his social media."

Logan nodded. "So," he took out his phone. "Could I get your number? Once I find out the exact time we need to be at the wedding, I can text you and let you know what time I'll pick you up."

She smiled and took his phone from his hand and put in her number. She handed it back to him with a smile.

"Well, did you enjoy the Challenge tonight?" Logan asked, trying to keep talking to her a little longer.

"It was awesome, both last night at the Mini-MART and tonight at the Challenge. It was so much fun, and your family was so impressive, and I'm so happy they won. Tell Miss Shelley again how much I appreciate her inviting

our whole family. They had a blast."

Logan nodded. "I will."

They both looked up when the front door opened. Melody's father stepped halfway out of the door.

"Oh, hey, Dad," Melody said quickly. "Um, Dad, so, do you remember Logan Adams?"

He stepped all the way out onto the porch and offered his hand. "Yes, hello there, young man. You were the one who sang tonight, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you did a fine job."

"Thank you, sir. I was just seeing Melody home since it was so late by the time we got out of the restaurant."

"Oh, Dad, it was amazing. Jeffy, uh, Dr. Kino, she went into labor and had her baby at the restaurant."

"Oh, well that does sound exciting. And she's okay and the baby is okay?"

"Yes, sir," Logan provided. "Everyone is doin' great."

"Good, that's good. Well, it's late," Melody's dad said.

Logan smiled and nodded. "Yes, sir. Um, well, good night, Melody. Mr. Keith, nice to see you again, sir."

"You too," Mr. Keith said.

"Night," Melody said with a smile.

Logan handed her bag to her father, turned, and headed down the walk.

Mr. Keith stood at the door watching him for a minute and then closed and locked the front door.

"He seems like a good kid," her father said.

Melody sighed. "He is. I mean, all the Kinos are."

"He's a Kino?"

"Well, he's an Adams, but he's Miss Shelley and Grandmaster Kino's grandson. Breanna Adams Kino is his father's sister, so she's his aunt and Joey Adams is his father's brother."

"Oh, got it." He raised his eyebrows at his daughter. "Well, this Logan Adams is a big improvement over Cade."

"Daaad, stop it."

"You don't still have feelings for him, do you?"

"No, Dad. None. Nada. Please, we broke up and I really don't want to talk about him anymore."

"I'm just sayin', this Logan kid, he seems interested in you. I saw that he sat next to you at the Challenge tonight and I noticed you and he were having some kind of deep conversation. And the kid IS a member of a very famous family. They're billionaires."

"Dad, I don't care how much money they have."

"Well, I do. It may seem superficial to you, but I want my daughter to have a good life. And that young man is gonna be a big deal. He'll probably win a Grammy one day, with his connections."

"If he wins a Grammy, it won't be because of his connections. It will be

because he's really good and has worked really hard. And I'm not goin' out with him because he's rich. That's just sick."

"You're going out with him?"

"Oh, well, sort of. I mean it's no big deal. He's gonna pick me up to go to a friend's wedding next Saturday."

"Yard day?"

"Yes."

"Well, I guess I can let you go."

Her mouth dropped open. "Are you kidding me? After all the fuss you made about us all being here to work and get it done as a family?"

He shrugged. "Do you want to go or not?"

"Yes, I wanna go and I was gonna ask if I could get my part of the yard work done during the week, like, after work."

He nodded. "That's my girl. Always so responsible. But I would've let you go anyway."

She frowned. "Why?"

"He seems like a nice kid."

"You mean, a nice rich kid."

He shrugged. "Let's be real. When someone rich and famous asks you out, you go, even if it's just because you're curious."

She sighed. "I guess so. I mean, if out of the blue some famous guy walks up to me and asks me out, I'd be curious to know what it's all about. But that's not why I'm going with Logan. Let me ask you this: If it were Cade asking me out for Saturday, would you have let me go?"

"Absolutely not. That guy broke your heart."

She sighed.

"This kid, this Logan Adams, seems like a nice kid and he's rich and he's famous. Sounds like a winner to me."

"He's not rich, Dad, his family is. And by the way, he's not a kid either."

"How old is he?"

"He's twenty."

"Two years older than you. That's not bad. And he's got a lot going for him and he's interested in you. Sounds promising."

"Good grief. You make me want to call it off."

"I'm not buying that. You won't because you realize that these ultra rich and mega-famous people are your ticket to a great life."

"Dad, I work for these rich, famous people and I like them. They're like regular people, only nicer, and I make good money and I do a good job, and I would never think of using them for anything and besides, this thing about dating Logan is completely separate."

"All I'm saying is these people can give you opportunities you haven't even thought of so you need to make sure you endear yourself to them."

She rolled her eyes. "I can't even." She turned and headed upstairs. "Good night, Dad." She frowned. That wasn't how she saw the Kinos or Logan and she hoped she wasn't lying to herself—hoped she was much deeper than using

people for their money.

✞✞✞

Hebrews 13:5
"Keep your life free from love of money,
and be content with what you have, for he has said,
'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"

Chapter Twenty-Two

November 10th, 11:00 AM, Sunday Morning
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky Kino smiled as he gazed at his family sitting around the dining table: Bree, young Eric, Jordan, Taylor, Gabe, Alec, Desi, Jewell, Josie, and Jamie. A year ago at this time, there would have been only the four of them. Now, their family had more than doubled, and each new person added something wonderful to it.

"Dad?"

Ricky glanced at young Eric.

"You okay?" young Eric asked his father.

Ricky nodded. "Yep. I was just looking at our increase. So, quick, young Eric, what's the percentage?"

Young Eric rolled his eyes. "Too easy, Dad." He glanced around the table. "Used to be four; now we have eleven. That's a 175% increase." He looked over at Jordan and squeezed her hand. "And a little over 57% of the increase came from Jordan's family, and a little over 28% came from Alec and Desi, and only 14% came from the Tanner family. But if you calculate their value, then our increase is in the thousands—maybe millions."

Ricky chuckled. "I agree."

"That reminds me, Three, I'm gonna need some tutoring help. Exams are coming up and I'm struggling in calculus," Jordan said.

He nodded. "No sweat, Two-Three. We got this."

"Jewell," Bree said, "this brunch has been one of the best meals I've ever had. You are a treasure."

"Oh, stop," Jewell said softly. "You helped make this meal, and you did a good job."

Bree laughed. "I tried. But you're teaching me a lot."

"The hash brown and egg casserole—you're gonna have to make two of those next time," young Eric said. "I could've eaten the whole thing."

"You almost did," Gabe complained.

Taylor smiled. "I loved the deviled strawberries."

"Yeah, those were so good," Desi agreed.

"I loved it all," Alec said. "I think I made a pig of myself."

Bree shook her head. "No, you ate just like any teen boy would eat."

"Well, whatever any of you would like to eat, I'll be happy to make it for you," Jewell offered.

Ricky frowned. "You're spoiling them." He lifted his phone when it

buzzed. "Finally."

"Finally? What were you waiting for?" young Eric asked.

"We have company."

"Who?"

"Your cousins-slash-brothers and your grandfather."

"Really? What are we gonna do?"

Ricky stood. "You're gonna stay right there." He turned and went to the door and greeted his father and JoJo and Logan. "Hey guys, come on in."

They entered the dining room. Bree stood and went to greet them, kissing each on their cheek. "What can I get for you? We've just had an amazing brunch thanks to Jewell."

"I've already eaten with Shelley and the little ones," Eric senior said.

JoJo laughed. "Well, we've already eaten too, but that won't stop us."

"Come in the kitchen and fill your plates," Bree offered graciously.

When the three newcomers took a seat around the dining room table, Ricky smiled. "Okay, young Eric, how much increase is this?"

"Overall increase is 250%. New increase is 27.27 repeating."

Alec chuckled. "That is amazing."

"He's just showing off. Sometimes he has to use a pencil," Taylor joked.

"Oh, wow, imagine having to use a pencil," Gabe said sarcastically.

JoJo moaned. "Oh man, this stuff, this is so good."

Bree nodded. "That, young man, is a hash brown and egg casserole, and it's thanks to Jewell."

"And you're lucky there was any left," Taylor said.

"So, why are you guys here?" young Eric asked.

"You'll see," Logan said with a smile.

"How's Jeffy and the baby?" Jordan asked.

Grandmaster Kino smiled. "She's doing fine, and little Elijah is nursing well. He's very strong. He can already lift his head a little."

"So," Eric senior began. "I'm here for a reason and Logan and JoJo came along because they wanted to be witnesses."

"Witnesses?"

Logan took out his phone and spoke. "Are you guys there?"

"Yes, we're here," Keegan answered.

Gabe frowned and looked at Logan's phone. "Is that my dad?"

"Yes. Your dad, and Master Appel and the rest of your family are all there."

Grandmaster Kino smiled and placed a box wrapped in white paper and tied with a black ribbon on the table. "Pass this down to Gabe, please."

Gabe's eyebrows shot up. "A gift for me?"

"Yes, for you, Gabriel Tanner. With permission from Master Appel and with your family and brothers as witnesses, we would like to present you with this token in recognition of your skills."

Gabe opened the box and pulled out a black belt with two gold stripes on one end, and words embroidered in gold on the other. He read them aloud. "Courage, humility, love and gratitude." He looked up, his eyes filled with

tears. “I’m a second degree?”

“You are so much more than that, young man,” Grandmaster Kino replied. “Remember, this is just a token of your skills. You’ve progressed and you’ve earned it.”

“I’m so proud of you, Gabe,” Master Appel said over the phone.

“Thank you, Master Appel, and I’m proud to be your student.”

“Go ahead and put it on,” Keegan said.

Gabe stood, tied the belt around his waist, and stepped back from the table. Grandmaster Kino stood, Ricky stood, young Eric stood, Logan and JoJo stood, Taylor stood, Josie and Jamie stood. Gabe bowed to each of them, and each bowed back.

“Wow,” Gabe said. “I had no idea this was coming.”

“I’m proud of you, son,” Keegan said.

“Me too,” Taylor said with a sigh.

“Thanks,” Gabe murmured. “I’m really touched and can’t think of the right words to say.”

“Well, that’s a first,” Jordan said, making everyone laugh.

Eric senior smiled. “And now, while I have everyone’s attention.” He placed another box on the table. “Pass that down to young Eric.”

Young Eric’s mouth opened in surprise. He quickly opened the box and removed the black belt. It had four gold stripes at one end and the same wording as Gabe’s at the other end. His lips pressed tightly together. Without saying a word, he wrapped the belt around his waist and tied it.

He looked up into his father’s eyes. Then he turned and bowed to his grandfather and father, followed by JoJo, Logan, Gabe, Taylor, Jamie and Josie in that order. He looked up. “Thank you, Granddad and Dad, for training me and for this token of my skills. I’ll work hard to be worthy of it and to honor the Kino name and to honor Zendo Ryu.”

“Yeah,” Gabe said suddenly. “*That’s* what I should’ve said.”

“Except *YOU* honor *Appel Martial Arts* first and then the Kino name,” Grandmaster Kino added.

“Yes, sir. And thank you, Master Appel, for training me so well and thank you, Grandmaster Eric Kino and Grandmaster Ricky Kino, for y’all training me for the Mini-MART so well.”

“You’re welcome,” John Appel replied. “You’re a good student.”

“I agree,” Grandmaster Kino said with a nod and a smile.

JoJo and Logan grabbed young Eric, hugging and punching him and messing up his hair, then grabbed Gabe and did the same.

“Pictures please,” Bree said as she held up her phone. “Young Eric and Gabe together first, then with the two Grandmasters, then with Logan and JoJo, and then with everyone here.”

The guys all obeyed.

“Okay, everyone, let’s get the table cleared,” Bree said afterward. “Desi and Alec have somewhere important to be.”

Desi offered a small but nervous smile.

Ricky noticed her nervousness, approached her and Alec, and took them aside for a quick private conversation.

"Hey you two, I know you might be a little nervous, but don't worry too much. Just be yourselves. Fill your hearts with love. Honor your father and mother, but don't compromise your own principles. I realize I don't have to tell you that, because you've already shown that you will stick to what you think is right. So, be strong, but be kind and respectful.

"And listen, just to prepare you for what might be said: his text said he wanted to apologize, but what he apologizes for may not be what you think he should apologize for, so graciously take whatever gift he gives you. And, Destiny, your father is a strong man, and he's also used to being in control, so he may try to take back some of that control. There's a possibility he might even invite you to move back into the house, or he may not. I'm just telling you to be prepared for something out of left field, but no matter what, handle yourselves with decorum and love only."

"And what should I do if he invites me to move back in?" Desi asked.

"Well, that's completely up to you. In one week, you'll be a married woman living with your husband in your own home anyway. If you want things to remain status quo, then decline respectfully. If you'd like to live there your last week of being their child, then do it, but don't let anyone talk you into something you don't want to do."

"I'm a little afraid to move back in right away, even for one week."

"Then don't," Alec said quickly.

Ricky smiled. "Let's not think the worst. I wasn't trying to scare you. I was trying to prepare you for what could happen. Still, if he asks, and you feel uncomfortable, then decline. However, if it would help, you can invite your family to stay *here* with you. We have plenty of room. And make sure you tell your mom and sister that you're gonna have a girls' day on Friday, doing whatever rituals you ladies do before a wedding. And please tell your father that the guys will all be getting together too, that evening and he is invited."

Alec smiled. "I didn't know about that."

"Oh, oops. Well, I didn't realize it was a surprise, so sorry I ruined that."

"I won't tell. But Mr. Kino, you've already done so much for us, we don't expect anything else."

He shrugged. "Nevertheless, it's happening. These guys," he said, motioning toward young Eric, Logan, Gabe, and JoJo, "are not gonna have you go off to be a married man without some kind of send-off."

"Well, I gotta say, I'm still blown away by the kindness you've all shown a complete stranger."

"I have a feeling you're not a complete stranger. Before we came to this earthly realm, there was a plan. Anyway, enough talk. You guys need to get ready, but listen—one more thing. Say a prayer before you get out of the car. And no matter what happens, we'll be here for you."

Alec extended his hand. "Thank you, sir. Thank you for everything."

Ricky smiled warmly. "Well, you're very welcome, but we're not done yet.

Let's get you two married and settled and get you working. And a few years down the road, when you've graduated and passed the bar, you can thank me by paying it forward."

"I promise I will," Alec said.

"I believe you."

✝✝✝

November 10th, 12:30 PM, Sunday Afternoon
Copeland Home, Hillcrest, California

Charity Copeland went to find her father. He was uncharacteristically in the kitchen, helping her mother with the luncheon they were preparing for Destiny and Alec and one other surprise guest. They'd hurried home from church and started working on the meal. Her father was wearing an apron, something she remembered him doing a long time ago, when she was little and they would have backyard cookouts. It warmed her heart to see it now. It was like amazing changes were taking place in this household and it was a miracle brought on by Desi making a moral mistake. It suddenly dawned on Charity that maybe it had all been part of a plan—maybe Desi's baby was supposed to be, or maybe God took something and used it to make a miracle in their household.

"Dad?" Charity asked quietly.

He turned and smiled at her. "You wanna know what you can do to help?" He nodded at the block of cheese sitting on the cutting board. "You can cut that into cubes and put it on that plate next to the bowl of grapes."

"Okay, I will, but I wanted to, um—I mean, I'd like to talk to you privately, if that's okay."

He glanced at his watch. "I can squeeze out a few minutes for you. Let's go to my office. Marvy?"

She smiled. "You go ahead. I've got this."

Charity walked to the office and sat in the chair in front of the desk—the chair usually filled by his clients.

"What is it you'd like to talk about?"

She swallowed hard. "Dad, I just wanted to say that I'm really happy that you invited Desi and Alec to lunch. But I'm a little nervous about it. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I'm worried that you'll get them here and then start fussing at them for what they did and it will all blow up."

He sighed and nodded. "You have good reason to think that might happen. I haven't exactly been a role model for piety or honor lately. I'm trying, Charity. I'm trying to turn over a new leaf, a new page. I'm trying to remember how I used to feel before I got so bogged down in making a living. I asked Desi and Alec and Ivana Morgan here for lunch because I want to apologize to them. To them all. I guess I should've made that clear to you."

"*You're* gonna apologize to *them*?"

He nodded. "What Ricky Kino said really shook me. And then it was you, my eldest daughter, my very brave and smart daughter, who had the courage to say things to me that needed to be said. Something you said, I'm not sure which part it was, but something hit its mark. Something hit home and woke

me up. It was like I was in a trance of some kind. I left the room and went to do something I haven't really done in a long time. I got down on my knees and prayed. My heart began to soften and it was as though a light came on in my brain. I don't know how I got so far off from the man I always thought I was—or *how* I became the man I became, a man you were ashamed of. I spoke with your mom, and with our pastor this morning. He prayed with me, and counseled me. I know that I have to humble myself and do this thing today."

"Dad, this just makes me so happy. It makes my heart feel light. But I just want to say, like—if they say something you don't like, please, please, don't get angry."

"I understand your fear, Charity. But don't worry. I'm good." He smiled. "And honey, I need to apologize to you too. I'm sorry I haven't been the father you've needed lately. I let my priorities get way out of whack. I'm gonna try to make it up to you."

She smiled. "I can't even believe what I'm hearing. A few days ago, the world seemed so dark and gray, and there was no joy. Right now, I feel like I could sing and dance and shout for joy."

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm sorry I made everything so dark and sad. I'll try to do better. But I'll still make mistakes, and I hope you can forgive me. I need to be the man you can depend on." He smiled, stood, came around the desk, and held out his arms. She stepped into his arms and sighed.

"I'm amazed, Dad, that life can feel so happy just by learning that your father is a good man."

Her words stung a bit, and he didn't respond because the comment struck deeply, and his emotions welled up. He sniffed. "Okay, well, let's go finish helping your mom."

She nodded and gave a small, affectionate giggle at the sight of her father getting emotional. Suddenly feeling light and happy, she looked heavenward for a moment and silently thanked God for the miracle that was taking place.

✞✞✞

Alec pulled the car into the Copeland driveway as he had so many times during his senior year in high school, the last time being a few weeks after prom, when he'd picked up Desi because she had something life-changing to tell him. He put the car in park, turned off the ignition, and turned to look at Desi. She was wringing her hands and she blew out a long breath.

"Nervous?"

She nodded.

"I won't let things escalate," he said. "I promise. If things get out of hand, we'll leave."

She nodded.

He got out and went around to help her out of the car. She stood and straightened the outfit Mrs. Kino and Taylor had chosen for her. She wore maternity jeans with black suede boots and a loose-fitting, lightweight white sweater with a V-neck and a lace insert for modesty. She smoothed her long blond hair, tucked it behind her ears, and looked up at Alec. "Do I look okay?"

He smiled. “You look amazing. Come on, let’s do this.” He took her hand and walked her to the door.

It was weird walking up to her own door and ringing the doorbell. The door opened immediately and Charity squealed at the sight of her baby sister.

“Get in here,” she ordered.

Desi stepped inside and was hugged fiercely by her older sister. Charity then pushed her back and looked her over. “Oh, Desi, you are so adorable.”

“You mean I’m fat.”

“I mean you’re adorable.” She looked over Desi’s shoulder and motioned at Alec. “Alec, come in, come in.”

He stepped inside and shut the door.

Marvenia came rushing into the room. “Oh, my baby girl,” she cried as she held her arms out to Desi. She hugged her daughter for a long time, then pulled away, put her hands on both of Desi’s cheeks, and looked into her eyes. They both had tears running down their cheeks.

Finally, Marvenia turned to Alec with a smile. “Hello, Alec,” she said softly and kindly.

He nodded. “Hi, Mrs. Copeland. Um, these are for you.” He handed her the bouquet of flowers he’d brought. Gabe’s idea.

“Oh thank you. They’re beautiful,” she gushed. She looked up at the handsome boy. “May I give you a hug too?”

He nodded and they gave each other a brief hug.

“Well, I’ll just go put these in some water. You two come in and make yourselves at home.” She immediately grimaced at the casual statement. It had been Destiny’s home for nearly her entire life and it seemed strange to tell her to make herself at home.

Charity led them into the living room, sat on the sofa, and patted the place next to her. “Come sit down, you guys. Oh, man, Desi, I’m so happy to see you I can’t stand it!”

Desi and Alec sat on the sofa, the same one they’d snuggled and kissed on many a night after her parents had gone to bed. It seemed so different now.

“I heard the baby is due at the end of January,” Charity said.

“How did you hear that?” Desi asked.

“Ricky Kino told us.”

“Oh, yeah, of course.”

“So, isn’t he just the cutest?” Charity asked. “He looks just like he does in the movies.”

“Yeah, we were a little starstruck the first time we met him, but I think it was Mrs. Kino—I mean, *the* Breanna Adams—who really, like, blew us away. She’s so gorgeous.”

“What’s the first thing you remember her saying?”

“Oh, um, like, she invited us in and chattered away. I can’t really remember. But the first thing that really impressed me was that she did our laundry. I mean, Breanna Adams washed our clothes and folded them and hung some things up and like—I mean, just like a regular mother would do. And

that's what's so cool about her. She's like a regular person."

"Yeah," Alec put in, "but they're not regular at all. They are the strongest, most dynamic people I've ever known."

Desi nodded. "He's right. Every single day they do something that blows me away."

"That's awesome. I can't wait to meet them. I mean, them together." She looked back and forth between Alec and her sister. "And how are you two getting along?"

Desi smiled and placed her hand in Alec's. "We are awesome."

Charity nodded. "You are so cute together. I'm happy for you."

Alec jumped to his feet as Dustin Copeland came into the room. He turned and helped Desi to her feet.

She lifted fearful eyes up to her father—and then he smiled. "Destiny," he said softly and moved forward. He hugged her briefly then drew back and looked her over. "It's so good to see you," he said, his voice breaking a bit. He cleared his throat and turned to Alec and offered his hand. "And you too, Alec. I mean that."

Alec shook the man's hand. "Thank you, sir."

"Well, you kids sit down. I have something to say to you and I'd like to get it over with so that we can sit down and enjoy this delicious lunch your mother has cooked up for us. Plus, we have another guest coming, so I'd like to have this discussion before she arrives."

"Oh. Okay," Desi said, her voice cautious.

"Dad, do you want me to leave?" Charity asked.

He shook his head. "No, I'd like you to stay."

Marvenia came into the room and set the vase of flowers on the side table.

"Honey, you come sit down too. This needs to be said in front of everyone."

Desi's eyes widened. This was very strange. The whole atmosphere—everything—seemed different. She watched her father as he took a seat. He sat on the edge of the chair and looked into her eyes, then at Alec, and finally back at her.

"I want to apologize to you both. The way I've behaved since learning that Desi was pregnant has been shameful. I realize that now. I have no excuses to give you. I've searched my mind trying to understand how I could've reacted the way I did—what made me so mad, to where I would throw my own daughter out of her home and even consider forcing her to give away my own grandson—give him up for adoption."

Desi's sharp intake of breath revealed she hadn't known that particular little piece of information.

He nodded at her reaction. "It's shocking, isn't it? The only answer I found was what your sister said to me and what Ricky Kino suggested. That I was embarrassed that MY daughter, the daughter of the great Christian, church-going, upright Dustin Copeland, could end up pregnant out of wedlock. My reaction was definitely not Christian in any way. Jesus said, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' Well, I'm ashamed to say that I was throwing

stones at the two of you when what I should have done was help you through it, help you find a way to handle it. I should've set an example of Christ-like forgiveness. I should have offered my assistance. I should have done exactly what the Kinos have done for you, or at least I should have tried. I don't have their connections, but there are things I could have and should have done to help you."

"Dad," Desi began. "You don't have to do—"

"Yes, I do, Desi. I have to humble myself completely. I have to bare my soul, not only to you and the young man who is about to be your husband, but to my other daughter, who has been rightfully ashamed of me, and to my wife, who has been patiently waiting for me to come around. Patiently waiting even though her own heart was breaking over the loss of her youngest child and her grandchild. So, I'm remorseful. I'm repenting. And I'm asking for God's forgiveness, and I'm asking for your forgiveness. I will do whatever you need me to do to make it right. I'll help you in any way I can."

There was silence for a moment, and then, surprisingly, Alec spoke up. "Mr. Copeland, I am not in a place to forgive anything because I have to ask forgiveness myself. I'm sorry that I compromised your daughter. I want you to know that Desi wasn't just another notch in my belt, so to speak. I wasn't using her. I truly love her. I had been drinking and we got carried away in the moment and it happened. My actions have caused her and your family and my own mother so much pain, and I am deeply sorry."

"Alec, you didn't force me," Desi said quickly. "I was all in, because I love you too—with all my heart, and I wanted to be with you." She turned to her father. "But Dad, I am really sorry. I too was drinking and I got caught up in the moment and I knew better and I did it anyway. So, I hope you can forgive me too. I didn't realize the consequences could be so hard. That they could tear a whole family apart."

Dustin nodded. "It shouldn't have torn our family apart. I let it do that. I'm so sorry that I didn't set a good example. At some point during the past ten or more years, I lost myself. I got my priorities all messed up and I forgot what it meant to be a follower of Jesus." He smiled. "So, you haven't said the words yet, so I guess that means you want to think about forgiving me, but let me just say to you that you are completely forgiven for your mistake. It happens. It isn't the end of the world, nor should it be. When we make mistakes, we make it right. And you two are making it right. And really, I'm so proud of you. Once you realized you'd made a mistake, you stuck to your principles and tried to make it right. And thank God for the Kinos."

Desi sniffed back her tears. "Dad, I forgive you. I didn't need to think about it. I was just so surprised at how different you seem that I was trying to digest what was happening. I forgive you, Daddy."

He smiled and nodded. "And you, Charity?"

She sniffed. "Daddy, of course I forgive you."

"And you, Marvy? I imagine I hurt you the most and you've put up with me all these years."

She wiped tears from her cheeks. "I forgive you, Dusty."

Dustin nodded and looked back at Alec. "Young man, I hope you too can forgive me. If I hadn't thrown my own daughter out of my house, you'd be in school right now. You were willing to give up all you'd worked for to try to support my daughter. I watched you out the bedroom window when you got here. The way you helped her out of the car. The gentle way you touched her hair and smiled at her. That's how a good man treats the girl he loves and I think my daughter and my grandson are in good hands."

"Thank you for that, Mr. Copeland. I intend to be the best husband and father I can be. And Mr. Copeland, as I was sitting here listening to this whole conversation, I realized something, and I think it's important."

"What's that?"

"I think we're all on the right path. Mr. Kino says that everything happens for a reason and that God has a plan. He says God's plans adjust to account for the choices we make and He can turn all things for good. He creates a new path. So, maybe things happened just the way they were supposed to happen. This event in our lives has taught me many things and I'm ending up in an even better position than before we got pregnant. I won't have to leave Desi while I go to school, we'll have a home to live in while I'm in school, I'm gonna be apprenticing at one of the nation's most prestigious law firms. All of that was because of the Kinos and we wouldn't know the Kinos at all if Desi and I hadn't been homeless and found ourselves at that gas station. And then you just said you lost yourself many years ago. And now, you say it's like you woke up out of a trance and you feel happier, right? I mean, maybe if Desi and I hadn't gotten pregnant, maybe you wouldn't ever wake up out of that trance. He works all things for good, right? So maybe it took something as drastic as this to wake you up. And if God wanted you to wake up, then that must mean God is mindful of you and wants you for His purposes."

The room was quiet for a moment.

Charity was thinking that she'd just had that exact realization a little while ago, but she didn't speak. She didn't think God made bad things happen, but He can use all things for our good. He is an awesome God.

Finally, Dustin spoke. "First, I believe you're right. Second, that must have been hard to say to me. And third, it was well said, and I see now that you're gonna be a fine attorney one day."

"Thank you, sir."

"I didn't know you even believed in God," Dustin added.

"Well, sir, I didn't. And I'm thinking that might have been part of God's plan too, because living with the Kinos has opened my eyes and I'm beginning to see that God is real. He interacts with us and helps us to learn and grow."

"He does indeed," Dustin agreed.

They all looked up at the sound of the doorbell.

"I'll get it," Dustin said as he walked to the door and opened it. "Hello, Ivana, I'm so glad you could come."

She smiled. "I'm so glad you invited me."

She stepped inside. Alec went to his mother and hugged her. This was going to be a wonderful day.

They all sat down to a fantastic luncheon. They talked and talked, catching up on everything. They talked about Alec and Destiny's adventures. They talked about their heartbreaks. They talked about the baby and asked what the couple needed. They talked about future plans and about going to church and about the wedding that would take place at the church the following Saturday.

"And Mom, Mrs. Kino told me that if I felt comfortable enough, I should ask you and Charity if you'd like to meet her at the church tomorrow morning to make last-minute plans, like make sure they have enough flowers ordered and figure out whatever else needs to be done," Desi said.

"If you felt comfortable enough?"

"Well, we weren't sure how this meeting today would go."

She smiled. "It's gone well, hasn't it? And yes, I would love to meet her at the church tomorrow."

"Me too," Charity said. "But I can only stay a little while because I have a class in the afternoon."

"Awesome, Char, that would be great," Desi said. "And Mrs. Morgan? Do you think you can come too?"

"I'll see if I can go into work late."

"Awesome!" Desi said.

They adjourned to the living room and talked some more. Finally, Desi began to yawn and announced that she needed to go back to the house to rest.

"Oh, Des, I wish you could stay here tonight," Charity said.

Desi glanced at Alec. They'd made a plan in case this subject came up. "I have a better idea. Why don't you come with us and spend the night with me over at the Kinos' house? You can meet the Kinos and then I'll come here and stay the night on Monday, and maybe Tuesday too."

"Me, come to the Kinos' house?" Charity said. "Oh, wow, that would be interesting, aaand awesome!"

"It is. Will you come?"

"Of course I will! Let me go pack a bag!" She ran upstairs.

Marvenia smiled at her younger daughter. "You seem so different."

"Well, Mom, I guess I've grown up a little. But I'm still the little girl who loves your lasagna and eats all the carrot cake when no one is looking."

"Oh, that was you?" her father asked with a chuckle.

Alec smiled. He felt grateful for the small family scene that was taking place and secretly vowed that even though he was only eighteen, one day he would make a whole lot of these types of scenes happen for his own family. Next, he would invite Mr. Copeland to the guys' night out.

✝✝✝

November 13th, Wednesday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Logan drove up to the house, pulled around to the front door, jumped out of his car, and headed inside. There was no one in sight. He immediately

started down to the music room because the purpose of his visit was to pick up the extra amp he needed for one of his final exams. Once he got downstairs, he heard the clanging of the weights and headed into the fitness room.

"Hey Grandma," Logan said. He glanced at the weight set on the leg-extensions machine and smiled. "Good job."

Shelley smiled. "It's only eighty pounds. I've lifted a lot more than that."

"Oh, well, sorry. Didn't mean to insult you."

She gave a soft laugh.

"So, who's got the kids? Melody?"

Shelley nodded. "Yes. They're supposed to be going down for their naps while I get in a quick workout. I need my strength if I'm gonna keep up with that bunch, ya know?"

Logan nodded. "Well, I came over to pick up an amp I need for my final tomorrow. And I think I'll go up and say hello to Melody."

She smiled. "That would be nice."

He grinned. "Right?" He quickly kissed her cheek. "See you later."

"Bye, hon."

He ran up the steps to the main level and headed toward the front stairway when his grandfather came through the front door.

"Hey, Granddad!"

"Hello there, Logan. In a rush?"

Logan stopped and smiled. "Um, no, sir, not really. I was just goin' up to say hello to Melody."

"You're kidding."

Logan rolled his eyes.

"Where's my wife?"

"She's downstairs, working out."

He nodded and headed that direction. Logan continued up the stairs. When he got to the top, he heard a sweet sound. The door to the kids' room was open and Melody was singing to them. He quietly approached and peeked in. The children were lying on a pallet of blankets in the middle of the room, sound asleep, and Melody was sitting on the edge of Angelina's bed singing "*You Are My Sunshine*."

Her light brown hair shone in the afternoon sunlight coming through the window. It was parted on the side and fell around her face. It wasn't quite as long as Jordan's, but still long enough to wear in a ponytail. Her eyes looked greenish in the light. Her nose was small and turned up slightly, and her mouth always appeared to be smiling. She wore jeans and a T-shirt with a large treble clef on the front and he wondered what that was about.

He sighed and closed his eyes a moment as she sang. Her voice was clear and sweet—soft and pretty. She finished the song and he poked his head in. "That was beautiful," he said.

She startled briefly and then smiled and put her finger to her lips. "Shh, you'll wake them," she whispered.

He walked in and sat beside her on the small bed. "That was beautiful," he

whispered.

She giggled. “I’m not a pro like you, but I can carry a tune.”

“Sing it again.”

“No.”

“Please. Sing it again and I’ll join in.”

She released a soft sigh and then nodded. She began singing again and he came in with the harmony. She turned toward him in surprise at how lovely it sounded together. She looked into his eyes and he smiled at her as he sang, nodding his head to keep her going. They sang it through twice and when they stopped they sat there looking into each other’s eyes. It was Melody who broke the silence.

“Wow,” she whispered. “That was really nice.”

He nodded. “It really was, wasn’t it? You have a sweet voice.”

“You do too.”

He laughed and she shushed him by putting her hand over his mouth.

He didn’t try to remove it, but just left it there. She finally moved it. Rising, she motioned for him to follow her. They went out into the hallway and had a seat on the top step.

“So, what are you doing here this time of day?” she asked.

“I had to come pick up an amplifier from the music room downstairs. I need it for my exam.”

“What happened to the amp you used at the coffee shop?”

He smiled shyly. “Well, I sort of dropped it down the stairs outside the music building.”

She giggled, which made him smile.

“So, that’s a cute shirt,” he said casually. “Did you wear it in my honor?”

She looked down at her shirt. “Sure.”

He smiled. “I like it.”

“It was a Christmas gift from one of my brothers last year. It was in honor of my name. Melody.”

“Ooh, I get it,” he said. “So, how old are your brothers?”

“Phillip is sixteen and is a junior in high school and Lyle is fourteen and is a freshman in high school.”

“And they both play football?”

She nodded.

“What positions?”

“Phil is a running back and Lyle is actually the quarterback for the JV.”

Logan nodded. “That’s great.”

“Did you play football?”

“I did. I was a receiver, but my arm got broken and I missed a season and I never went back. I got distracted by music.”

“You broke your arm playing football?”

He shook his head. “No, someone broke it for me, on purpose, but that’s a story for another day.”

“Oh, okay. Well, anyway,” she said softly, “I’m glad I got to see you

because if you'd been much later I wouldn't be here."

"Why? Where are you going?"

"As soon as Miss Shelley finishes her workout I'm going home early to work on the yard."

"Oh yeah, you said you were gonna try to do your part during the week. So, what is your part?"

"I have to rake all the leaves front and back and bag them up."

"That doesn't sound too hard."

She shrugged. "It's not too bad because we only have one really large tree in the yard. The problem is, in the back yard the neighbors have two giant trees and all their leaves blow into our back yard for some reason. So that's gonna be the hard part."

"I see." He pulled out his phone and glanced at the time. "So, you'll probably be there in about an hour?"

She nodded.

"Well, okay then. I have to go run some errands. But maybe I'll see you again soon."

She frowned. "You have to leave already?"

He smiled because it sounded as if she'd like him to stay. She'd never sounded like that before. "Yes, I do. Sorry. But thanks for singing with me. Let's do it again sometime."

She smiled sweetly. "Let's do."

She watched as he rose and galloped down the stairs. A minute later he headed out the front door carrying an amp. She was starting to get used to the way he looked. She could almost actually speak to him now instead of freezing up. His brown hair, his light blue eyes. He was a little over six feet she knew because he was about the same height as Gabe. He was well-built, again like Gabe, well, really like all the Kino men. His jeans looked good on him. He usually dressed very casually. Jeans and a T-shirt, sometimes adding a sweater or sweatshirt now that it was November. He was definitely a hottie. And waay out of her league. Still, she was looking forward to the wedding on Saturday and having him next to her all day.

✞✞✞

November 13th, Wednesday Afternoon

UCLA Campus, Los Angeles, California

"Oh, shoot, I forgot my notebook," Jordan said to Agent Wyatt.

"Stay right here. I'll get it." He ran back toward the parking lot, only because it was a short distance and she wouldn't be out of his sight.

"It's lying on the floorboard," she called after him. She hopped around in a semicircle, looking ahead to the science building. She was beginning to think that she would indeed take Agent Wyatt up on his offer to get a wheelchair so he could wheel her around campus while she kept her foot elevated, because right now her whole leg was throbbing.

"Well, hello there, my gorgeous girl."

Jordan turned to see Mason Cole approaching with a huge smile on his face. She frowned. “Hello, Mason.”

“How are you feeling? I heard what happened to you.”

“I’m fine. Maybe a little worse for wear, but getting better every day. Thanks for asking.”

“Well, I’m so sorry that happened, but ya know, I have to say that I couldn’t help but think that if your boyfriend had been with you for a change, it never would’ve happened.”

“That’s true. But then the guy wouldn’t have been caught and he’d still be out there terrorizing the campus.”

He nodded. “Touché.”

“And my boyfriend can’t be by my side every minute of the day and night.”

“Well, if you were my girl, I wouldn’t let you out of my sight.”

She just shook her head.

“And now here you are, in your condition, standing all alone, completely vulnerable to anyone who’d want to do you harm.”

“Is that what you think?” she asked.

He glanced around and saw the security agent standing a short distance away. “Oh. So that’s how it is.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, he doesn’t have time to be with you, so he throws his money at a security company to do his job.”

“You’re beginning to piss me off,” she said loudly.

Immediately Agent Wyatt moved closer. “Are you ready to go, Miss Brooks?”

“Yes, I am. And thanks for giving me privacy to talk to this guy, but from now on, I won’t need it.”

“Understood, Miss Brooks,” he said with a smile.

✝✝✝

Melody was armed with a stack of lawn bags and a leaf rake. She decided to start in the front yard so that when her father drove up that evening, he’d notice first thing that she was doing her part like she promised. She was thinking that she might get the front yard done and part of the back today, and then she’d have to work really hard tomorrow to get the backyard finished.

She started working from under the big tree in the front yard, mentally dividing the area under the tree into four sections.

“Hey there, Melody!”

She turned to see a bright yellow Ford Mustang pull up to the curb in front of the house. She frowned and went back to raking. Even though she’d looked away, she knew he’d gotten out of the car because she heard the door slam.

“What? Are you trying to ignore me?”

She stopped raking, looked up and gave him a fake smile. “Hello, Cade.”

“Hello there, beautiful. You’re looking better than ever.”

She frowned. “I look exactly the same.”

"Well, then, I guess time away from you has made me appreciate just how beautiful you are."

"Whatever."

"I see you're working hard."

"What are you doing here, Cade?"

"What? I can't come by and see my girlfriend?"

"I'm not your girlfriend. You broke up with me, remember?"

"Aww, come on. Are you still mad about that?"

"Nope. Actually I'm not mad at all. I'm thankful. But I'm kinda busy right now, so you may leave."

"Melody, you're not being very nice."

"You weren't very nice to me either the last several times I saw you."

"So, you ARE still mad. Or maybe hurt. Come on, babe, are your feelings still hurt?" He came close and reached for her hand. "You really can't blame me, can you? I mean, I was goin' off to college and you still had a year of high school. I needed to be free. I certainly couldn't be a college man and keep my innocent little high school girlfriend by my side. Especially one who was holding out for—whatever, her dream man, I guess."

She looked down at his hand gripping hers, and jerked free. "I have no feelings for you at all. Good or bad. What are you doing here?"

"I had some time and was nearby and thought I'd swing by and see what you were up to. Maybe you and I could hop in the car and go get an ice cream or coffee or something."

"I don't drink coffee and you know that. And I wouldn't go with you anywhere. Now leave, Cade. I have work to do."

She turned and headed toward the other side of the tree but he grabbed her arm. "Just wait, Melody. You're acting like a baby."

"Let go of my arm."

He grinned. "No." He pulled her forward.

She tried to pull away. "Let me go, Cade, or I swear—"

"Let her go."

Melody gasped as she looked up to see Logan's red SUV and Logan striding across the yard toward her. Behind him were the two Davis boys, Daniel and Jeremy.

Logan walked straight up without stopping or hesitating, grabbed the hand that held her arm and bent it back.

Cade yelled and jerked his hand away.

"Who the hell are *you*?" Cade demanded.

Melody blinked up at Logan, her eyes wide.

"I'm her boyfriend and I don't appreciate you grabbing her."

Her mouth fell open. He smiled at her, then turned and frowned at Cade.

"Get back in your car and drive away. And don't even think about coming back here. And if I ever see you touch her again, I will take you out. Completely and unapologetically."

He backed away. “Don’t think you’ve heard the last of me, Melody. You and I need to talk.”

Logan advanced toward him, but Cade got in his car and sped away.

Logan turned and put his hands on Melody’s shoulders. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I don’t know what he thought he was doing.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s my ex-boyfriend. He broke up with me over a year ago, but he keeps coming by to see if I’m ready.”

“Ready? For what?”

She looked at Daniel and Jeremy and back up at Logan.

“Oh,” he said softly. He felt his temper rising and had to tamp it down. He drew a deep breath. “Keeps coming by? How often does he come by?”

“Not very often. We broke up in August of last year, right before he went off to college. I didn’t see him again until last Christmas when he stopped by. Then he came again a few months later, and then this past June.”

“And does he always put his hands on you?”

She shrugged and then nodded. “He tries to, I guess. Each time he gets a little bolder, a little pushier, and sometimes angry. Though he keeps accusing *me* of being mad at *him*.”

“And are you?”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t. I was completely over him.”

“But now?”

“But I’m starting to get mad. He’s pressuring me to go out with him—like for coffee—but I know that will turn into a wrestling match and I have no desire to fight him off.”

Logan’s lips pressed tightly together as he thought of tiny Melody with her sweet demeanor trying to fight off this guy who was so much bigger than her. He drew a deep breath. “What did he do in high school?”

“Do? Like to me?”

He smiled. “No, well, okay, did he do something to you in high school?”

She laughed. “Not really.”

He looked over at the Davis boys. “You guys go ahead and get started and we’ll join you in a minute. Dan, you get the blower. Jeremy, you grab the rake and open a bag.” He looked back at her. “Then how do you know it will turn into a wrestling match?”

“Because right before we broke up, we had a few of those wrestling matches. He thought I should give myself to him as a graduation present or a going-away-to-college present. I thought otherwise.”

He nodded. “Melody, I’m sorry you had to go through that. Listen, not all guys are like that.”

She smiled. “I know.”

“Good.” He smiled. “So, I’m, uh, sorry for what I said. I mean for lying about being your boyfriend. It just popped out. I felt like this guy needed to know that he doesn’t have the right to put his hands on you. And one thing that

will usually stop a guy like that is to know that the girl has moved on without him. Hope you're not mad about that."

She shook her head. "Not really. It just surprised me."

"So, did this guy play sports in high school?"

"He played football."

"Does he play in college?"

"No, he's not that good. Why?"

Logan grinned. "Just figuring out his abilities."

"So you'd know how to fight him?"

He shook his head. "I already know that. So I can teach you how to fight him off when I'm not around."

She smiled. "That is so sweet of you."

He laughed. "Yeah, that's what I was goin' for." He started toward his vehicle. "Come on, Melody, let's get some equipment out of the Rover and knock this yard out."

She followed him to his car. He opened the back and handed her two more rakes and an edger.

They finished the front yard quickly as Dan blew the leaves from the rest of the yard toward the tree and Logan, Melody, and Jeremy raked and bagged them up. Thirty minutes later the front was done. The grass still needed a final end-of-season mow, but Melody said to leave it for her brothers and father on Saturday or it would ruin their fun.

In the backyard, there were not just a few more leaves. There was a ton of them. The trees she spoke of in the neighbor's yard were oaks, and their large leaves were everywhere. Dan and Jeremy made two giant piles, and Logan couldn't resist picking up eleven-year-old Jeremy and tossing him into the pile. The pile was so large that he completely disappeared.

Melody laughed. "Oh, I have to get that on video! Rake the leaves together again," she said as she pulled her phone out of her back pocket.

They did it again and she videoed Logan and Dan tossing Jeremy into the pile. Then Logan went after Daniel, and tossed him in. He whispered something to the boys and they quickly raked the leaves back together. Then Logan handed his phone to Dan and told him to video. Logan then turned toward Melody with a mischievous grin.

Realizing she was next, she laughed, shrieked and took off running, but he caught her easily, carried her to the giant pile, and tossed her in. She jumped out and grabbed a pile in her arms and dumped it over his head. "Help me, guys," Melody yelled, and they all grabbed Logan and wrestled him into the leaves. Once he was on his back in the pile they kept pushing more leaves on top of him until he was completely covered.

He stilled and waited for the threesome to quiet down and then reached up suddenly and grabbed Melody and wrestled her down into the pile and covered her up. She fought, but the boys held her down and Logan shoveled leaves on her. She was laughing so hard she couldn't escape. "Give up," Logan ordered.

"Never," she yelled and reached over her head, grabbed an armful of leaves and tossed them at him.

Logan held her down this time and let Dan and Jeremy pile on the leaves.

"Give?"

"Yes, I give," she said as she laughed.

"What's going on here?"

They all turned to see Melody's father and two brothers standing on the back porch. The four scrambled up and began brushing leaves off themselves and each other.

Logan smiled and hurried forward to shake hands. "Mr. Keith, it's nice to see you again. Hey guys," Logan said to her brothers. He extended his hand to them. "Phillip and Lyle, right?"

"Phil," Phillip corrected. "And good memory."

Logan nodded.

"Hey Dad," Melody said sweetly. "Remember I promised I would get my part of the yard done because I won't be here on Saturday?"

He nodded. "Yes, and here you are. The front yard looks great. I see you have help, though I don't see much work being done back here."

She laughed. "It'll get done. We sort of got into a battle."

"Yep, Mel, and you lost," Lyle said.

She smiled. "Did I?"

Logan chuckled. "Sorry, sir, we'll get this cleaned up."

"It's no problem, Logan. Would you guys like to stay for dinner?"

"Oh, wow, I'd love to, but I can't tonight. I have to get these guys home and I have a family dinner I have to be at, and then a rehearsal."

"Busy young man. No worries. We'll ask again soon."

"Thank you. I'll look forward to it."

"What are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

"Dad!" Melody said sharply.

"What?" He shrugged. "Just asking."

Logan smiled. "Our family is headed out of state to visit some friends."

He nodded. "Sounds like a good time."

"Always," Logan said with a nod.

✝✝✝

Proverbs 28:13

"Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper,
but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

Chapter Twenty-Three

November 13th, 8:00 PM, Wednesday Evening
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"It's not as much about remembering formulas, babe, as understanding concepts. I think we might need to go back to some algebra and trig."

Jordan sighed in frustration. "My brain doesn't work. I feel like you're speaking to me in Japanese."

Young Eric smiled. "Ima, Nihongo de hanashite iru."

She sighed. "Very funny. What did you say?"

"I said, 'Now I'm speaking in Japanese.'"

She glared at him. "Sounds the same. And this is not funny."

He nodded. "Okay. Sorry. Listen, hon, we'll work this out." He thought a moment. "I know, let's apply some math to something that interests you. Like, let's calculate your bat speed."

Jordan blinked up at him. "Okay."

He pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and started writing down variables.

They worked for another hour and finally, in tears, Jordan rose from the kitchen table, grabbed her crutches, and headed upstairs.

Young Eric watched her go and sighed. Gabe and Taylor, who were sitting across from them, glanced up at Jordan as she ascended the stairs and then looked back at Eric.

"Maybe I'm just a bad teacher," he mumbled.

Gabe shrugged. "I doubt that. Ya know, some people just struggle with math. Teach *me* something."

Eric nodded and wrote out an equation. "Can you solve this?"

Gabe looked at it, frowned, asked a couple of questions about the formulas, worked on it for about five minutes, and handed the paper back to Eric. Young Eric looked it over and nodded. "That's correct."

Gabe shrugged. "But I wouldn't have gotten it if I hadn't known the answers to the questions I asked you, and maybe the difference is, Jordan doesn't know what questions to ask."

Eric nodded. "So, she doesn't know what she doesn't know."

Gabe nodded with a smile.

Taylor decided to put in her two cents' worth. "Maybe she needs an actual math tutor, one whose mind isn't so far advanced, one who can teach her what questions she needs to ask."

Young Eric frowned. "I feel bad that I'm not able to teach her."

"You CAN teach her," Gabe affirmed. "Just go way back to the basics and

don't assume that she knows anything."

"I don't wanna talk to her like she's stupid. That will upset her."

"You can assume she doesn't know something without sounding degrading," Gabe answered. "When you're teaching Nate stuff, you assume he doesn't know anything, cuz he's only two, but you also don't talk to him like he's dumb, because you know he's not. So, just adjust your attitude."

Eric smiled. "Gabe, my brother, how did *YOU* get to be so smart?"

"I'm not really. Well, I'm like, people smart."

"Yeah right, Gabe," Taylor said. "You're smart. Tell him what happens if you get a bad grade in school."

Gabe grinned, but remained silent.

"Okay," young Eric said. "What happens if you get a bad grade?"

Gabe smiled. "I don't know."

Eric chuckled. "Good one." He rose. "Guess I'll go up and see if she's even speaking to me."

"Yeah, good luck."

Eric trotted up the stairs, went to Jordan's room and knocked on her door. When she didn't answer, he opened the door and peeked in. She was standing by the window, looking out over the front lawn. "Can I come in?"

She gave a slight shrug. "Sure."

He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist and softly nibbled on her neck.

She sighed.

"Don't be upset and don't stress. You'll eventually get it."

She shook her head. "The exam is next week. What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing. Nothing is wrong with you. You're perfect."

"Obviously not."

"It's not you, it's me. I'm just not teaching you right. Please don't stress."

She sighed.

He smiled. "Let it go. Let's think about something else right now."

"Like what?"

"Hmm, well, you girls are gonna be having a fun day on Friday. Let's talk about that and forget about calculus."

She smiled. "Good idea, because I am so happy for Desi. Her life has turned around so quickly. From being hungry and homeless to having a beautiful wedding, a nice home to move into, having her family back. I'm happy for her. And her sister is so sweet and so dynamic. Did you know she's studying theology at Biola?"

"Yeah, I heard that."

She sighed. "Maybe I should switch degrees to something that doesn't require math."

"You could. What was your motivation behind your business degree? I mean, I know you wanted to open a medical facility using Aunt Jeffy's protocols. Is that still your passion?"

"I don't know. My life has changed so much since I first started school. I

feel like a different person. The motivation behind getting that degree was because my father died of cancer. Dr. Kino's protocols are changing the world and I thought I wanted to be a part of that."

"And you don't anymore?"

"I'm not sure. I thought I had to get educated, go to college, and get a degree to be successful. But there are a lot of really smart people who are doing amazing things without those college degrees. And lately, all I hear about are all the political agendas being pushed on campus, and they all seem so hateful. And I'm feeling very discouraged and, like, empty. Not in life. Just when I think about going to school."

He turned her around to look into her eyes. "Do you think that maybe you feel this way because you were assaulted on a college campus, or, I guess, near the campus?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. I know I felt actual fear when I went by the apartment today, even though Agent Wyatt was right beside me."

Her body shuddered and he pulled her to him and pressed her head against his chest. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry that happened to you. I'm sorry it's in your head. It's not been very long so it feels raw, but I'm right here for you, and you will heal, and you will eventually get past all of this."

"Will I?"

"Yes. And I imagine it would help if a certain guy would leave you alone."

She looked up at him, surprise on her face. "Agent Wyatt told you?"

He nodded. "Maybe I'll tag along with you tomorrow."

"Would you do that?"

"Yes, of course. I'd do anything for you, Jordan. I'm sorry I couldn't come today, but I had those publicity meetings."

"I can't expect you to come along with me everywhere I go, and Mason shouldn't expect you to either."

He frowned. "He said I should be with you?"

"Oh, I guess Agent Wyatt didn't hear that part. Yes, Mason's point every time he speaks to me is that you're never around and you don't care enough about me to stay by my side, and that if I were his girlfriend, he'd never let me out of his sight. And that you don't take the time to be with me because you can just pay someone to do that."

"He said all that?"

She nodded.

"Do you think that's true?"

"No! Of course not. Three, you can't be with me all the time. That would be ridiculous, and you'd probably get on my nerves if you were."

He chuckled. "Really? Well, that's good to know."

"I don't mean that in a bad way. But we'd get tired of always being together, don't you think?"

"I don't know about that, but I think I'd like to try to find out," he said softly in her ear.

She gave a soft laugh.

He pulled away. “So, are you saying that you’re tired of me?”

“No! I’d love to spend more time with you. I’m excited that now that the Challenge is over, and you don’t have to train all day and be in bed by nine, then we can do more things together.”

“What would you like to do?”

“Anything. Everything.”

He nodded. “Well, we are going to that concert a week from Friday.”

“That’ll be fun. I’m really looking forward to it.”

“And right after that, we’re headed across the country to Georgia. Are you looking forward to that?”

“So much. I just wish I wasn’t gonna be so cumbersome with this cast on.”

“I’ll carry you piggyback everywhere we go.”

“Ha ha. Cuz that won’t be cumbersome.”

He smiled. “Did your mom decide if she’s coming?”

“Yes. And she is. My mom and the kids are really excited. Like me, they’ve never been anywhere.”

“Hmmm, you know what? We might need to take them shopping.”

“Why?”

“To make sure they have all they need for traveling. And it’s colder in the winter in Georgia. They have actual seasons there.”

“It’s cooler here in the winter too.”

He smiled. “You’re right. But there it gets down below freezing sometimes, so they might need coats or jackets. Let’s make a list. And let’s buy the kids and your mom new outfits, just for fun.”

She smiled. “Sounds good. What else do we need, I mean, for travel?”

“Well, it would probably be easier for you to do a search of things to bring when traveling in the US.”

“Okay.”

“So, do that, and decide what you will need out of those things, and then we’ll get them and we’ll get new backpacks for everyone to carry on the plane, and if you haven’t ever traveled, I’m guessing you’ll need luggage.”

Her eyes opened wide. “Oh! I didn’t even think about that. Isn’t that expensive?”

He frowned. Sighed.

She smiled. “Oh, yeah. Sorry. Old habits.”

She broke free from his embrace, went to the table next to her bed, grabbed up her laptop, sat down on the bed and did a search. He sat on the bed watching her, pleased that her mind had jumped to something other than math.

“Look! There’s a bunch of packing lists already put together for people who are traveling.”

He smiled and nodded.

“Hm, travel pillows, we don’t have those, headphones, I have some earbuds, toiletries, of course, water bottles, you gave us those, bathing suits and binoculars, huh?”

He laughed. “If we were traveling in the summer or going sightseeing. Find

a list for the winter in the southeast."

She nodded and searched. "Hmm, we'll need jackets for sure, and long-sleeved shirts or sweatshirts, hats, even gloves! Wow. We have a lot to do."

He laughed. "We do. And I'll have time to do it with you."

She smiled. "All I have to do now is get past these exams."

He nodded. "You will. And I think I'm gonna get Aunt Jeffy to help you."

Jordan thought about that idea. "She just had a baby. She doesn't have time to help me."

"She's an amazing multitasker. Until then..." He took the computer from her and set it back on the table. "Why don't you go into the bathroom, get out of those jeans, and get comfortable."

She looked into his eyes and nodded. Rising, she headed to the bathroom, grabbing her nightshirt as she went. She came out a few minutes later with her hair down and brushed, her teeth clean, her face washed, and wearing a faded pink nightshirt with hearts all over it.

He smiled at her as she came and sat down beside him. He touched her nightshirt. "How old is that?"

"Very old. Why, is it that bad?"

"No. It's kinda cute the way it's all faded and stuff and has, what is that—black marker on the shoulder?"

She giggled. "Yes. I fell asleep doing homework."

"I think we'll also get you a new nightshirt for our trip."

"I'm not used to getting things I can do without."

"I understand. And I love how unspoiled you are. But I want you to be a little pampered every once in a while. And a nightshirt or even a pretty nightgown hardly counts as excessive pampering."

"Oh, I get it now," she said. "You want to see me in some sexy feminine lingerie."

He eased her back on the bed and lay down beside her. "You see right through me." Gently running his hand over her hair, along her cheek, to her shoulder and down her arm, he gazed deeply into her eyes. "When we're married, I'm gonna give you everything."

Her eyes opened wide. "What? What did you just say?"

He blinked. "Oh, was I talking out loud?"

"Yes, you were."

He smiled. "Don't act so surprised. I've hinted many times that my heart is headed in that direction."

She released a deep sigh. "Well then, what are you waiting for?" she asked the question with her eyebrows raised, as if on a dare.

He grinned. "Well, first and foremost, I'm waiting to make sure I don't receive a negative answer. And then, I'm waiting to make sure I have all my ducks in a row."

"Do you think we're a little young?"

"I did think that, until I spoke to my father about that very thing."

"You did?"

"Yes, and I was surprised that he told me what he did."

"What did he say?"

He sighed. "Well, it's kind of a long explanation."

"Tell me, and try to sum up."

He chuckled. "Okay. Let's see, Dad talked about history. About how people used to marry very young. Some of that was because of life expectancy and some was just different cultures. There was a myriad of other reasons. Things changed over the centuries, yadda yadda yadda, and then, in the '50s, after World War II, getting married right after high school became common for many Americans. And since women had joined the workforce because of the war, a lot of women put their husbands through college, which led to big changes with divorce and alimony." He paused and ran a finger over her cheek.

"Then, the divorce rate began to rise considerably and people began to think it might be best to wait until they were older and more mature instead of jumping right into marriage. Then there was the sexual revolution, and people began to think it was okay to just love and have sex with anyone you please. Of course, that was a great victory for Satan. Ignoring God and the rules He set forth for our good, living deviant lifestyles, and indulging one's passions led to an explosion of unwanted pregnancies. That brought about the pill being mainstream, and eventually the legalization of abortion. The dark forces were hard at work and gaining ground.

"People didn't realize that the solution to those problems was God, not birth control and certainly not the killing of babies. A lot of that was because they wanted to do what they wanted to do without being made to feel guilty or responsible for their own actions. The dream for a lot of kids, especially here in America, the land of plenty, what my dad calls Babylon, was to go out and live the life, like the guys on the TV show *Friends*. Go get an apartment, live with a bunch of friends. Hook up. Have fun. Wait to get married until after thirty, or maybe don't even get married at all. The feminist thought-process gained ground, which eventually evolved into 'women don't need men,' 'men are bad,' and 'masculinity is toxic'. But I digress. Back to us being so young.

"My father knew he loved my mother when he was twenty-one. My mom says she thinks she may have loved my dad too, but she was swayed by that other way of thinking. She thought she needed to date around. Gain experience. Meet as many guys as possible. Go to parties. Have fun. My father was thirty years old when he finally convinced her that they were supposed to be together. There was a lot more to it, but bottom line—they regret the wasted years of not being together. My mom feels sure that she would've had several more children if she hadn't been so blinded by this thing that you had to wait until you're older to get married."

Jordan sighed. "Yeah, but, I mean, don't people who marry young get divorced because they were just too immature to marry?"

"Well, yes, that was happening, but the reason is wrong. It wasn't necessarily because of immaturity, though that may have been part of it. When no one is held responsible for their actions, people remain immature, like a

child who's been indulged. But Dad says the deeper problem, and I agree with him, was because they hadn't been taught how to have a good marriage. They didn't know what to look for in a spouse. They sought out someone attractive, someone they had chemistry with, but not the things that last. Like finding a man who can lead, who is not afraid of hard work and who can protect and take care of his family. They sought meaningless or shallow things. Money. Prestige. Chemistry. Looks. They forgot that men and women are different and play different roles. But mostly, the most important thing, they weren't taught to have God in their relationship and in their marriage."

"Well," Jordan began. "Some people think it's okay to believe different things in a marriage, like, I mean, to allow each other to have their own tastes and opinions."

"See, you're mixing it up. Believing in different things and having different tastes and opinions are not the same thing. It's certainly okay to have different opinions, or tastes, like favorite colors, favorite foods, even different interests, stuff like that. But, if they think it's okay to have different beliefs about God, then there's only one reason anyone would think that's okay, and that's because they don't think God is that important. Ya know, like, who cares what my husband thinks about God because that's not a priority in my life. They think it's no more important than what color they want to paint the living room. Or maybe it's a cultural thing, but that IS important. Satan has tried to push us to accept things not of God in the name of diversity, or sharing cultures, but that's a lie. There is only one God, and Jesus is the ONLY way to the Father. God is THE most important thing in your life. And people act like they don't care about that. When people think deeply different beliefs about God don't matter, they may not understand how profoundly it shapes their choices and their vision for a family.

"But Jordan, you *would* care when you realize that because your husband loves God and sincerely wants to be a godly man, then you'll know he would probably never cheat on you and he'll work hard to support and protect his family. You'll be able to admire and respect him because he would try to be the best person that he could be. You'll see that he doesn't lie. He doesn't lack faith. He's positive. He prays and asks God for guidance. He's humble. He curbs his temper. He's patient. And the same for how a man looks at the woman in his life. If she's a godly woman, he knows she will not cheat on him, she will work hard for their family and to support him in his endeavors too. They will be a real team. They will follow God's laws together. Of course, there are no guarantees, even for Christians. We can choose evil or good."

Jordan nodded. "And like we talked about before, God's laws are not to restrict us, they are to protect us and living by those rules brings happiness, real happiness. Partying and good times don't always bring happiness."

"Right. Just ask Alec and Desi."

Jordan sighed.

"So, Jordan, I love you and I believe you love me. But that love may not last if we don't have God in our lives. Because, well, what is love? It's more

than just a strong sexual attraction. That's another thing Dad talked about. We can't marry young just because we're eager to have sex."

"So, we ARE too young?"

He smiled. "No, that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying we love each other, and one of the reasons we do is because we have respect and admiration for each other. And if I love God and try hard to live according to God's will, then that love you have for me could grow because you would also have respect and admiration for me. It's hard to love your spouse and be true to them when you have no respect or admiration for them. It has to be more than just, like, a sexual attraction."

She nodded. "I think I get it. Like, you're hot, Three, but would that really matter if you lied to me about something, or if you didn't bother to go to work and support our family?"

"Exactly. If I were lazy or slothful you would eventually lose respect for me. You would try to hold on because you remember the love you had for me, but the admiration would be gone and eventually, you would feel that you were trapped living with a horrible person. But if you know that because I try with all my heart to live as God would have me live—to be upright, hardworking, on fire for Him, then you'll know that's not gonna happen."

"But, Three, people go through hard times."

"Right, they do. I recently did. You are right now. But because you know what I believe, you know I'm gonna work hard to get back on track. And you'll help me to do that, because we're a team. And you know I would help you through anything, because I believe that's part of my duty as a man of God—to take care of my loved ones. And I love you, Jordan."

"Why?"

He smiled. "It's not just because you're gorgeous and hot and I totally am attracted to you. I mean, that's how it started. But almost immediately it was easy to see that you were honest, strong, hard-working, humble, you think logically, you're..."

"Except where math is concerned."

He laughed. "The light is gonna go on, you just need a better teacher. Back to what I was saying. You're courageous, you're kind, you're a loyal friend, you love your mother and your siblings, you're smart, perceptive, and I'm drawn to your light, and that light comes from God. I saw your light immediately, Jordan. I love you so much. And that night when you went searching for God and we prayed on the beach together, I knew for sure that you and I were meant to be."

She smiled and snuggled up close to his chest. He hugged her to him for several minutes. Finally, she looked up at his face and touched his chin, feeling the slight stubble from a day's growth of beard. "I love you, Three. I thank God that He brought you to me. You're such a good guy. A good man. And I'm lucky to have you."

He stroked a finger down her cheek, raised her chin, and kissed her. When he pulled away, he was breathing hard. "Wow. Well, I guess I need to go to my

room before I lose control."

"Oh, Three, will you hold me just a little longer?"

He sighed, closed his eyes, drew a deep breath, and slowly released it before he finally nodded. "Okay. Just a little longer."

She cuddled up against him. "Three?" she murmured.

"Hm?"

"You'll get a positive answer."

He smiled.

✝✝✝

November 15th, 8:00 AM, Friday Morning
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Shelley sat at the vanity in her bathroom, using a wide-toothed comb to go through her thick wet curls. Eric stepped out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his waist and came up behind her. She smiled up at him in the mirror.

"Let me help," he said softly. He took the comb from her hand and ran it through her hair until no tangles remained. He set the comb down and placed his hands on her shoulders. "My beautiful Shelley girl. I never get tired of looking at you."

She gave a soft laugh. "Right backatcha, Eric." Her eyes quickly ran over the large scar on his chest. She stood and turned to face him and softly ran her hand over it. "Does this hurt?"

He put his hand on hers to still it. "Not in the way you mean. But it's killing me that there's no time to let you finish exploring my body."

She smiled. "Ah, Eric, it never gets old, does it? Even though we do."

"I'll never get tired of loving you, Shelley. By the way, you did a great job in our training this morning."

She smiled. "I've been working extra hard. I need to be strong to keep up with the kids."

"See, that's what I love about you. Instead of complaining that you're unable to keep up with them, you do something about it. And it appears to be helping, because I noticed this morning." He bent down to kiss her and she reciprocated.

He lifted his head. "So, what is the schedule again today?"

"Melody has the kids in the music room right now. She promised to teach them a song. I'm going down to make breakfast and then Melody and Angelina and I are leaving for the day. The schedule after I leave is up to you, however, what usually happens on Friday is a lot of play time outside, or a trip to the park, a martial arts lesson, some kind of art or craft project, and of course some lunch in there somewhere. Then I'll be home in time to cook dinner so that you can go off with the guys." She smiled. "Did they ever decide where?"

Eric nodded. "We're not gonna go get plastered, if that's what you're asking. I'm treating them all to a big steak dinner at The Grill. We'll toast the groom a few times and then we're all headed home to get a good night's rest for the big day."

"Sounds lovely."

"What are you ladies gonna do all day?"

"Well, I know there's gonna be a massage, a manicure, a luncheon, and then we're going to some kind of dance club called The Lumberyard and then—"

"Wait, what?"

Shelley's eyes twinkled. "Just kidding. I wanted to see if you were actually listening to me."

Eric chuckled. "Have I ever not listened to you?"

"No, but that's because I keep you on your toes."

"You absolutely do, my love." He kissed her softly. "Whaddya say we lock the bedroom door and play around?" He raised his head at the sound of the front door alarm.

Giggling, Shelley grabbed his towel and jerked it away. "I'd say we have no time. Better get dressed. I think we have company."

He sighed.

Shelley slipped on her shoes and left the bedroom. She went straight to the kitchen and found JoJo with his head in the refrigerator.

"Whatcha lookin' for, sweetie?"

He turned. "Hey, Grandma!" He closed the fridge door and went to kiss her cheek. "I am lookin' for some of those chocolate breakfast muffins you usually have. Are you all out?"

She smiled. "No. They're in that plastic container way in the back on the bottom shelf."

He looked again and found them. Pulling out the container, he set it on the counter and dove in.

"Grab the eggs out of the fridge for me," Shelley ordered. "You wanna stay for breakfast?"

"Well, I already ate breakfast at home. Logan and I both did, but I bet we could do some damage to a little second breakfast."

"Logan's here?"

JoJo nodded. "He went downstairs to find Melody."

Shelley smiled. "He likes her, doesn't he?"

"Who wouldn't?"

Meanwhile, downstairs Logan stood outside the music room peeking in at an adorable scene. Melody and the children all sat in a circle. Each child had a percussion instrument: a tambourine, maracas, a triangle, rhythm sticks, or a bell. She was teaching them *"You Are My Sunshine*." She was clapping her hands to the beat as she sang the song and they were trying to play their instruments at the same time she clapped her hands.

They came to the end of the verse and she applauded them. "That was awesome! You guys were so good. And now we're gonna learn some of the words. When I stop singing you have to say the next word. Let's try. Ready? You are my—"

"Sunshine," the kids half yelled, half sang.

"My only—"

"Sunshine!" they all yelled that time.

"You make me—"

"Happy!"

"When skies are—"

"GRAY!" they screamed.

She put her hands to her ears. "Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. Are we singing this song or screaming this song?"

"Screaming! Screaming!" they all yelled.

Logan couldn't stop himself; he entered the room. The kids all jumped around, screaming his name and jumping up to hug him. He bent down to hug each one. "Can I join you?" he asked as he sat down on the floor next to Melody. "Hi," he said with a smile.

"Hey," she said softly. "What are you doing here so early?"

"JoJo and I came by to talk to Granddad."

"About what?"

He shrugged. "Just need a little counseling. We spoke to Dad this morning and after he talked with us, he said we should go talk to Granddad, because, like, that's what he does."

"What do you need counseling about?"

He smiled. "You're not supposed to ask people that."

She laughed. "Well, maybe I can help. I'm really good at telling people what to do."

He chuckled. "Really? So, you're saying you're bossy?"

"Am I bossy, kids?"

"Yes!" Noah, Nate and Manny yelled.

"No," Angelina and Abraham said quietly.

"Oh, I see we have some softies in here," Logan teased.

"I'm not soft," Angelina protested.

"Yes, you are," Nate argued.

Logan grimaced. He'd messed up. "It's okay to be kind, Angelina," he said, making all of the kids go quiet. "You weren't really being soft, just kind. I was just teasing about being soft. Although being soft is okay sometimes. Like Melody, or your Mom, sometimes they are very bossy, and sometimes they are very kind and loving and soft, right?"

The kids all nodded. He looked at Melody who was grinning at him, her eyebrows raised. "Whew," he said, making her giggle. "Crisis averted."

"So," she began, "I was just teaching these rugrats a song."

"I heard. Let's sing it together, you and I, like we did the other day so they can see that it's a really pretty song and it sounds much better when they're not screaming at the top of their lungs."

Melody nodded. "Okay. Um, what note do you want me to start on?"

"Well, let's put it in the *key* of C major." He hummed the note for her.

Though Melody had no idea what key was C major, she hummed and matched his note and he nodded at her.

They sang the song together, Melody on the melody and Logan on the

harmony and it was even more beautiful than the last time because they were in a little bit higher key. The children were quiet. The people outside the room were blown away.

"Oh my goodness, Logan, Melody, you just brought tears to my eyes," Shelley said as she poked her head in the room.

Logan grinned. Melody looked up with a smile. "It's Logan that makes it so pretty."

"You sing well too," JoJo put in.

"It was really lovely," Eric said.

"What are you all doing down here?" Logan asked.

"I sent JoJo down to get you for breakfast, and he came back up and told your grandfather and me that we had to come down and hear something special. And he was right. And now, you have to do it one more time and let me get it on video," Shelley said.

Melody shook her head.

"Come on," Logan encouraged. "When God gives you a gift, you don't hide it, you share it."

"I don't have a gift, you do."

"You have a very sweet voice," Shelley insisted. "Please, sing it one more time for me."

"I agree, Melody, your voice has a very sweet and pleasing sound to it," Logan assured her. "Please sing with me."

She looked up into his blue eyes and he smiled at her so sweetly. How could she turn that down? Melody sighed and did as requested. Shelley made a video and when it was done, they all headed up to breakfast.

Logan and JoJo were last and JoJo put his hand on Logan's shoulder. "She's special," JoJo said quietly.

Logan nodded. "I agree."

"And gorgeous."

"I agree."

"I think I'll ask her out," JoJo said.

Logan stopped and stared at his brother.

JoJo chuckled. "Just kiddin', bro."

✞✞✞

November 15th, 11:00 AM, Friday Morning

Belliza Organix Salon, Beverly Hills, California

With little Angelina on her lap, Taylor reached over and squeezed Desi's hand as they sat side by side getting their feet bathed and massaged. "Are you excited, Des?"

Desi nodded with a smile. "I'm excited and nervous."

Taylor thought about that. She wondered why Desi would be nervous about marrying the guy she was pretty much already living with. They'd already done the deed, she thought, and the wedding plans were all taken care of.

"Why do you look so puzzled?" Desi asked.

Taylor smiled. "Oh wow, sorry for being so obvious. My father would not

like that my thoughts were so easily read." She giggled. "I was just wondering why you're nervous."

Desi nodded with understanding. "Right? I mean, the whole thing is being handled by professionals and it's all paid for. The dress I'm wearing is beautiful and you almost can't tell that I'm six and a half months prego. I've reunited with my family." She paused and smiled at her sister Charity on the other side of her, who was listening to the conversation. "We have a house to go to that's really nice. I'm healthy, Alec is healthy, the baby is healthy, what is there to be nervous about?"

Taylor nodded. "Are you having doubts about Alec?"

"No! Absolutely not. I am so in love with him."

Charity took her other hand. "Are you having doubts about yourself?"

Destiny sat and thought about that for a moment or two. She sighed. "I mean, I'm just a kid myself. I don't really know how to take care of a child and a husband."

"I get that you're young," Taylor said. "But you're not dumb. Most of it will come naturally to you, like, instinct. But just think of your mom." Taylor nodded toward the woman who was currently chatting with Taylor's mom and Alec's mom.

"What about my mom?"

"Just think about how she would handle things and do what she would do. And remember, now that you have your family back you can call your mom anytime to ask her about stuff whenever you feel unsure. And your sister. And *my* mom. And you have your friends from school coming to the wedding, so they'll be available for some moral support. And I hope you know that even though we haven't known you very long, Jordan and I will be there for you in two seconds. Always and forever. And I mean that. So, you're not gonna get married tomorrow and go off to your little house and that's that and like, okay, bye-bye, you're on your own. We'll all be there for you."

Charity smiled at the young Taylor Kino. "You are a special girl, Taylor. I'm so glad my sister has you in her life."

Desi nodded and squeezed Taylor's hand. "She really is special. All of the Kinos have been like, angels I guess. The girls and the guys."

"That's sweet," Taylor said. She jumped when the woman massaging her foot hit a sore spot.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "You seem to have a bruise right here."

Taylor looked down and examined her foot. "Oh yeah. We were breaking boards on the beach and I had a bad hit."

Charity and Desi giggled.

The woman, a reflexologist, smiled. The news didn't surprise her. She was used to taking care of the Kino family. And every once in a while, one of the men would actually accompany his wife to the salon and get his feet tended to. That was always a treat for the women who worked in the salon.

Jordan came up behind Desi's chair on her crutches and leaned down to her ear. "Are you having a good time?"

Desi looked up and smiled. “I am. Are you already done?”

Jordan giggled. “Yeah, I only had one foot to do. I’m on my way to do hair and nails. So did you love the body massage? I was just wondering since you were sitting up.”

“Oh, it was still good. The lady said I was very tense and by the time she was finished I felt like a new person. How about you?”

“I fell asleep. It felt really good. I decided that from now on, I’m gonna get my man to give me a massage as often as possible.”

Taylor giggled at that and wondered how her brother would feel about that. Then she wondered how Gabe would feel about it. She decided she would find out by asking him to massage her shoulders tonight.

Jordan smiled at Charity. “Are you having a good time too?”

“I am. And it’s been so nice to get to meet all of my sister’s new friends. You’ve all been so kind.”

Jordan grinned. “Yeah, that’s what we do.” Her words surprised her. She realized she was thinking like she was a member of the Kino family. She smiled. And one day she would be. The thought was a beautiful one.

Taylor smiled up at Jordan. She was thinking along the same lines. Jordan would one day be her sister-in-law. She was just sure of it. She looked around at the other ladies from their group. Her grandmother and Miss Angel were already having their hair washed and conditioned. Her mother and Aunts Breez and Bella and Alec’s mom, Ivana, were being led back to do the same. Her Aunt Jeffy had taken baby Elijah and gone back to nurse him and a very pregnant Kimmie had accompanied her. The newest of their group, Melody, sat quietly on the other side of Charity getting her foot massage. Taylor sat up a little so she could see her. “How ya doin’ over there, Melody?”

“I’m good. Feelin’ wicked chill right now.”

Taylor giggled. “Good. Just didn’t want ya to feel left out of the conversation.”

“Don’t worry about that. I don’t feel left out. I don’t really like to be the center of attention.”

“She don’t flex,” Jordan added with a laugh.

They all laughed. Jordan pivoted on her crutches. “Well, I’ll see you over at the hair station. I gotta get off my feet.” She ambled away.

“Isn’t she the cutest?” Charity said as Jordan moved away.

“She really is. She’s the best. I just love her so much,” Taylor said. “And my brother does too.”

“What happened to her foot?”

Desi sighed. “She was attacked over near UCLA by a serial rapist and he beat her up really bad and twisted her leg until her foot broke.”

“Oh, wow, that was her? I heard about that.” Charity shook her head. “That is terrible.”

“But thanks to her, they caught the guy,” Melody put in.

Charity focused in on Melody. “So, Melody, you graduated from high school this past spring?”

"Yes."

"Are you going to college?"

"I'm not sure what I want to do so I'm just working right now."

"What high school did you go to?" Desi asked.

"I went to Oceanside, over in the Huntington Beach area."

"Oh, the Davis family lives over in that area," Taylor said.

"Yeah, that's what Logan told me when he followed me home after the Challenge."

"Logan followed you home?" Taylor asked.

"Yeah, he said it was too late for me to be out alone and he wanted to make sure I got in safely."

"Well, that was sweet," Charity said.

Taylor smiled. It was more than sweet. It was awesome.

"So, how old is Logan?" Charity asked.

"He's twenty," Taylor answered.

"And your brother, how old is he?"

"He'll be twenty-one next month."

"So, are there, like, any more guys in the family around twenty-five or so?" Charity asked.

Taylor giggled. "JoJo's the oldest of us cousins and he's twenty-one."

"Well darn. Anyway, if you come across any guys as awesome as the guys in this family, send one my way."

"I'll keep my eyes open," Taylor agreed. "How old are you, Charity?"

"I'm twenty-two."

"I want my toes done," Angelina suddenly blurted out.

"Oh, you do, do ya?" Taylor asked. She grabbed up Angelina's foot and took her shoe off and grabbed a toe. "This little piggy went to market..."

Angelina squealed and giggled. In the end, though, she got a tiny foot massage and toenails painted a pretty pink.

Once all the ladies were massaged, mani'd pedi'd, washed, conditioned, trimmed and styled, they went to *The Blue House* for lunch. They were seated in a large banquet room in the rear where the tables had been pushed together for the large group. Destiny looked around at the group of magnificent ladies. Miss Shelley, Angel, Kimmie, Jeffy, sisters Breez and Bella Adams, Ivana Morgan, Bree and Taylor, Jordan, Melody, little Angelina Kino, little Emily, Kelstyn and Sophia Adams, and finally Desi's own sister Charity and mom, Marvenia. The women in this room were the kindest and wisest women she'd ever known.

Currently they were chatting and looking over the menu. Desi felt so grateful to be able to have this moment. She glanced at her sister and smiled and Charity took her hand and squeezed it. Desi tuned back into the conversation. They talked about their men—about Miss Shelley almost losing her husband a few months earlier, Taylor almost losing Gabe, and Jordan thinking she'd lost young Eric and how grateful she was to have him back safe and sound. They got around to Alec and how he tried to protect and take care

of Desi and what a good guy he was. They moved on to talk about Mark and Joey, and Jason, then about JoJo and finally Logan and how talented he was and how beautifully he'd sung at The Kino Challenge. That led to Shelley talking about Logan and Melody singing together this morning for the children and that led to Shelley sharing the video she'd made with the group.

They all watched it and were astonished at how beautiful Melody's voice was and how well it blended with Logan's deep, mellow voice.

"Melody," Taylor said, "please let me post this on Gabe's website."

Melody shrugged. "I don't care what you do with it, but I don't see the big deal. I'm not a singer."

"But your voice is so sweet, so natural."

Melody shook her head, obviously uncomfortable.

"I told you," Jordan said. "She don't flex."

"Really, Melody, can I post it?"

She laughed. "Go ahead. Whatever makes you happy."

Taylor giggled. "Good. I'm posting it." She did it immediately and then sent Gabe the link to let him know that she posted the video on his website, then suggested that he forward it to Isla. Melody was only eighteen and Taylor thought Isla would like it for *Teenspotter.*

The women and girls had a lovely time at the luncheon, dining on asparagus crepes, piña colada fruit salad, pecan chicken salad sliders, smoked almond cheese toasts, berry tartlets, shrimp salad appetizers, broccoli quiche cups, and potato chowder. They drank ginger mint juleps and finished off with mini chocolate wafer cakes. It was scrumptious.

The luncheon ended with short speeches given by both Charity and her mother, thanking Bree, her husband and her son for their kindnesses, and telling everyone how grateful they were to each person present and how deeply touched they were by the way everyone had taken their Destiny under their wings, protected her, helped her heal, and, in essence, done God's work. This day there were tears and cheers and bonds formed that would never be broken.

Melody rode back to the Kino home with Shelley to collect her car. As soon as they walked in she heard "Hey Grandma," and, "Hi Mom," and "Hello, sweetheart."

Shelley headed straight to her husband to kiss his cheek but he grabbed her hand and pulled her into his lap. Melody stood halfway in the large open foyer and halfway in the giant living room. She was pleasantly surprised to find Logan there. JoJo, Mark and Joey were also there. Logan immediately rose from where the men sat in the living room.

"Melody! Hi!" Logan said. "I was hoping I'd get to see you today. You're back earlier than I expected."

She smiled sweetly. "Well, some of the girls went last minute shopping together, but Miss Shelley says she hates to shop and I have somewhere to be, so we came back."

She turned to look at the others in the room and smiled and nodded. "Hello, Grandmaster Kino. Hello, Mr. Adams and Mr. Adams. Hey, JoJo."

They all smiled and greeted her. Mark looked at her more closely than usual. This was the girl who had his son's attention. Long, light brown hair, bright hazel eyes, probably only about five feet three or four inches tall. He knew she was a whiz with the children and that she worked very hard for his mom, doing all of the children's laundry and all the dishes after breakfast and lunch. She had a little turned-up nose and a very sweet smile.

"So, where do you have to be?" Logan asked.

"Oh, I, um, have to go to a football game."

"What game?" JoJo asked.

"My old high school, Oceanside, up in Huntington Beach. My brother plays football and it's his last game of the season."

"Oh, so, he didn't play last Friday?" Logan asked. "I'm just askin' cuz he was at the Mini-MART."

"It was their bye week."

"But the week before you were at the Brookside homecoming game, and not at your brother's game?" Logan asked.

She nodded. "I was working. Work takes precedence."

Mark and Joey both smiled.

"Well, Melody, if we'd known you had somewhere to be, we would have given you the night off," Grandmaster Kino said.

She smiled. "I know. But I didn't want to ask for time off when I just barely started working for you. That just looks bad. And I hardly ever went to my brothers' games anyway because with my old job, I almost always had to work on Friday nights."

Logan nodded.

"So, what's their record for the season?" JoJo asked.

Melody frowned. "Oh, well, I'm embarrassed to say that I don't know."

JoJo pulled out his phone. "No problem, I'll look it up." It took him less than a minute. His eyebrows raised. "Well, not bad; they're 7 and 2. So far that's a really good season. A win tonight would make it 8 and 2. They'll head to the playoffs."

She smiled. "Really? Okay, good. I guess I'm not a very good big sister."

"I doubt that's the case," Logan said.

She sighed.

"Where are the children?" Shelley asked.

Eric smiled. "They are upstairs watching *'Finding Nemo*' up in our room in our bed."

Shelley smiled. "Sounds like fun, but why in our bed?"

"Because they miss their mom and like to snuggle down in Mom's bed."

She smiled. "Aww, my sweet babies." She sighed. "Okay, well, I'll get dinner started in a few minutes, but I wanna go upstairs and see them. What time are you guys leaving?"

Eric glanced at his watch. "In thirty minutes. That gives you time to go up and rest with the children, and I'll let you know when we're leaving."

Shelley leaned close and kissed her husband's cheek. "Thank you, Eric. I

am tired." She rose off his lap and turned to Melody. "It was so much fun today, Melody, I'm so glad you were able to come."

"Thank you for inviting me."

"My pleasure. Okay guys, see you tomorrow."

"Bye Mom," Mark and Joey said.

"Bye, Grandma," Logan and JoJo said.

Shelley headed upstairs.

"Well, I guess I'll be going too," Melody added quickly.

Logan started toward the door. "I'll see you to your car."

She smiled. "That's not necessary."

He shrugged. "Maybe not, but it's gonna happen anyway."

JoJo, Mark, Joey, and Eric senior watched them leave.

"So, are those two a couple now?" Joey asked.

JoJo shook his head. "Not yet, Uncle Joey, but Logan's workin' on it."

"She seems like a very sweet girl," Mark said.

"She is, Dad. She's just about perfect for Logan. It's almost like Grandma handpicked her just for him."

"It wouldn't surprise me if that's exactly what she did," Eric said.

Mark and Joey chuckled.

JoJo smiled. "Well, if that's the case, I guess I need her to get to work on finding my girl. She can start interviewing for the position as soon as football season is over."

"More than likely, kiddo, you're headed for the draft," his father reminded him. JoJo sighed.

Mark raised his eyebrows and glanced at Eric. That was a strange response and he wondered what was going on in JoJo's mind.

"Well, come on, boys," Eric senior said. "We have thirty minutes. Let's throw some dinner together for Shelley and the kids. Shelley seems more tired than usual."

Outside, Logan opened Melody's car door and held it for her. He smiled. "Well, I'll see you in the morning."

"I'm looking forward to it," she replied.

"I, uh, so I'm sorry it's so early, but I have to get the sound system set up."

"No problem. I'm used to getting up early. I'll be ready."

He closed her door and backed away. "Drive safe," he said loudly.

She waved and pulled away. He watched her circle around and head down the drive. He was very much looking forward to spending the entire day with her tomorrow.

✝✝✝

Proverbs 31:10

"An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels."

Chapter Twenty-Four

November 15th, 7:00 PM, Friday Evening
The Grill, Los Angeles, California

The guys all held up their glasses as young Eric proposed a toast to the groom. "To Alec, who stayed strong and held on to protect his girl against all odds. May you be blessed in your marriage as a husband and as a father."

"To Alec," the men all repeated before they drank.

Alec looked around at the men who were present. He was astonished at this group who were toasting him. Just a few weeks ago, he was living in a tent in the woods behind a gas station, literally begging people to hire him to work for a day—anything to provide a meal for his girl. Now, he was about to be married in a church. He had transportation, a home to move into, and a job—a real job, working at a law firm where he might one day practice. He didn't even understand how he deserved so many amazing blessings.

Alec's emotions welled up. He glanced at young Eric and at Mr. Kino. They were God's warriors for sure. All of them were really, just like Grandmaster Kino was always saying. Even Destiny's own father, who a few short weeks ago might have been glad to hear that Alec was dead, was now sitting here with this group of men. They'd worked a miracle there and Alec was filled with gratitude and something else. He suddenly had a burning desire to be like these men. To have the ability to work a miracle in someone's life. A lasting miracle. Not for his own glory. But to do God's work. Wow. He realized he'd become a believer and it was a beautiful thing.

Ricky Kino raised his glass of Perrier and everyone quieted to hear his toast. "I want to toast a new member of our group. Dustin Copeland, I know Alec is glad you're here tonight and I want to say that the rest of us are also extremely glad that you're here with us. To Dustin," he ended.

"Hear, hear!" they cheered.

Dustin stood and everyone quieted again. "First off, I would like to stand and publicly thank Alec for staying strong and not giving up on life or on my daughter. I want to publicly apologize for how hard I made it for the two of you, and I want to publicly thank you, Ricky and Eric Kino, for finding Alec and Desi, for taking them in, and for turning everything around. I am humbled and grateful and here's to the three of you. May God bless you all."

"Amen," they all said. Some clapped Dustin on the back.

Gabe watched the interaction and smiled. His heart was full to see someone who'd somehow slipped away from God's presence find his way back. It was beautiful. He thought of that scripture about the shepherd leaving the ninety-

nine sheep to search for the one. When he found the lost sheep, he carried it back home on his shoulders and everyone rejoiced. Seeing that scripture unfold right in front of him made it even more powerful than he'd ever understood it to be. Gabe looked down when his phone started buzzing and didn't stop. He pulled it up in front of his face and scrolled. "Uh, Logan," Gabe said.

Logan looked over, eyebrows raised. "Yeah?"

"You and Melody, you guys are like, trending."

"Huh?"

"Apparently Taylor posted a video of you and Melody singing that song, and it's gone viral."

"Really?" He thought a moment. "That's cool. Hmm, but I wonder how Melody is gonna feel about that."

"Well, she knows that Taylor posted it because Taylor asked her permission, so, she can't be angry about it."

"Well, I don't think she'll be upset about it going viral. I think she'll be hurt by mean comments."

Gabe scrolled for a minute. "Well, if there are any mean comments, they're few and far between, because everything I'm reading is positive."

He scrolled a little more. "Oh, well that one isn't very kind."

"What's it say?"

Gabe shook his head. "You don't wanna know."

"Just tell me now. You already have my curiosity up."

"Okay, well, it says, 'That girl is the Kinos' maid. He's just slummin' it with the help.'"

Logan shook his head. "I wonder how they know Melody works for the grands." He sighed. "Maybe she'll be smart enough to not read the comments."

"You weren't," Gabe said, making the others chuckle.

✝✝✝

November 15th, Friday Evening

Oceanside High School, Huntington Beach, California

"Go! Go, Phil, goooo! Yes!" Melody screamed as her brother broke free, put on the gas and ran over sixty yards for a touchdown. They were behind by two scores, but Phil's score just got them closer. She turned to high-five and hug her parents and younger brother.

They were all jumping up and down and screaming. Her father let loose a long whistle. People sitting around them were hitting her father and brother on the back. She heard people around her saying, "That boy is fast." And "Man oh man, he's got a future."

She smiled. Her brother *was* good! But he was quiet. Humble. He never really said anything about himself. Why was she just now realizing it? It's like, being around Logan and the Kinos and watching their interactions with each other was opening her eyes to her own family. She looked over at her little brother, Lyle. He was chatting excitedly with her dad, laughing, feeling happy for his older brother's accomplishments. Very cool. She suddenly felt a strong urge to be a better sister. It seemed she always had her mind on her own

troubles, like what she was gonna do with her life, what made her happy, what kinds of things interested her, how she could find a better job, and what she could do to make money. She'd been focusing on herself so much, she hadn't been thinking much at all about her family—people that were important to her. She never really did anything to help them. She hardly ever even interacted with them. That had to change.

As far as her little jobs, she'd mostly worked in the food industry, which she hated, but it was the easiest job to find. She'd started at the ice cream place at the mall, when she'd been a sophomore. Then went to fast food as a junior. Then changed during her senior year to a restaurant, then changed this past summer to a high-end restaurant. She worked hard. She'd bought an old used car, paid for it by herself, paid for her own gas and insurance, and then started saving up for school. Only, she wasn't sure if she wanted to go the college route and go into debt with student loans. So many people she'd met at work had some useless degree and still worked as a server in a restaurant.

She didn't know what the solution was, but she did know that she was blessed to now be working for the Kinos. Her parents wanted her to go to college, but that's just because they considered it the most socially accepted thing to do. Melody knew it would make them feel proud, that their daughter was in college, studying to be something impressive. But she just couldn't bring herself to go that route—not when she had no idea what she wanted to do with her life. Though, after working with the Kino children, she was beginning to think that working with children might be where her heart lay.

"Earth to Mellie."

Melody looked over at her sweet mom with a smile. Carol Keith was a slim woman with brown hair that came to her shoulders and brown eyes and a very kind smile.

"You in deep thought?" her mother asked.

Melody shook her head. "Just thinking about Phil and how good he is and I wish I'd been able to see more of his games."

"Well, there's always next year, Mel," Lyle said.

She smiled and nodded. "Will you be playing JV or varsity next year?"

"Probably varsity," he said. "Jayden is graduating and I think I have a chance at QB."

"Fingers crossed," Melody said with a smile.

Lyle smiled. "Thanks, sis. It'll be cool to play with Phil for his senior year."

"Hey, Lyle, get down here."

Lyle waved at a group of guys from his freshman team, then turned and looked at his dad.

"Go ahead. But don't leave the stadium."

Lyle headed down to sit with his teammates.

"Hey, Melody," her father said. "It's almost halftime. Whaddya think about running down to the concession stand before it gets too busy and gettin' your old man a hotdog and some of those chili fries?"

"Eeew, Dad, really?"

He grinned. “It’s not a football game without some greasy junk food.”

He handed her a twenty and she rose. “Mom? You want anything?”

“Just get me a bottle of water.”

She nodded. “Be right back.”

It was the last game of the season and the place was packed. She had several people ahead of her in line and she tried to decide if she wanted anything. Nothing sounded appealing, though. Or, maybe a candy bar.

“Well, well, well, look what we have here.”

It took her a minute to recognize the voice and the fact that he was speaking to her. Before she realized what was happening, his hand closed around her wrist. He jerked her out of line and pulled her over to the dimly lit side of the concession building, out of sight of most of the crowd.

“Cade, what are you doing? Let go of me.”

He laughed and let go of her wrist after he shoved her against the brick wall. “Imagine how I felt to be here at my old alma mater to watch a game, and find my girl here. How lucky is that?”

“I’m not your girl, and you’re not lucky at all.” She started to leave but he grabbed her arm and shoved her back to the wall.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Come on now, Melodeeee. Tell me you haven’t missed all the fun times we used to have.”

The alcohol on his breath was strong and she shook her head at him. “I haven’t missed you at all, Cade. Not one minute.”

His eyes narrowed. “Melody, that is cold and not very nice for you to say about your boyfriend.”

“Ex-boyfriend. Ex. YOU broke up with me, remember?”

“You keep saying that. Look, I know you must be upset about that. You can’t really blame me. I was leaving for college. You were about to be a senior in high school, and you’d already told me that you didn’t want to take our relationship any further. So, really, it was you who ended it. All you had to do to keep things going was give a little.”

She swallowed hard. “You mean give everything.”

He smiled. “I was your boyfriend for two years. I’d been patient.”

“Give me a break, Cade. We’re done. Done. I have no feelings for you whatsoever. I’ve moved on. I advise you to do the same.” She started to walk away but he grabbed her arm again and shoved her against the wall. This time, though, he moved close and grabbed her face with one hand, squeezed her cheeks hard to hold her still, and forced his mouth on hers. She squealed, and struggled, and pummeled him with her fists. He finally let go of her cheeks but kept her pinned to the wall with his body.

She looked up at him with tears welling in her eyes. “I’m here with my parents, Cade, and my father is gonna come looking for me if I don’t get back soon with his food.” Her voice shook with fear and she was frustrated that she couldn’t control it.

“I’m not scared of your father. As a matter of fact, I could take your father

out with one solid punch."

She gasped. "I can't believe you said that. What is wrong with you? You used to be a nice guy. You've changed. You're talking about assaulting my father? Have you lost your mind?"

He smiled. "Maybe it's because you make me crazy."

"I've done nothing to you, Cade. Nothing."

"Yep, and that's the problem."

"Stop this."

"Where's your boyfriend tonight?"

She swallowed. "None of your business. Now let me go or I'm gonna start screaming and make a scene and have you arrested."

He laughed at her. She drew a deep breath and opened her mouth to scream. He slapped his hand over her mouth. "Okay, calm down. But Melody, we're not done, you and me. Not by a long shot."

She didn't argue with him because she was afraid to. He stepped back and allowed her to leave. She quickly got back in line at the concession stand, her entire body shaking. She watched to make sure he didn't come back at her, because if he came within ten feet of her, she was gonna start screaming and never stop.

✝✝✝

November 16th, 8:00 AM, Saturday Morning

Keith Home, Huntington Beach, California

Melody stared into the mirror, trying to see if the makeup had covered the bruise on her cheek well enough to make it through the day. She'd been aghast when she'd looked in the mirror while brushing her teeth this morning and saw the blue thumbprint on her cheek, very plain to see. She leaned closer. It looked like she'd been able to cover it, but she'd probably have to touch up the makeup several times during the day.

She heard the knock on the front door. Grabbing up her purse, she headed down the stairs of the split-level home. Her father beat her to the door.

"Hello, Logan!"

"Good morning, sir," Logan said brightly.

"Well, don't you look fine this morning."

"Thank you, sir," he said, looking down at his black suit and blue tie.

Mr. Keith stepped back. "Come in, come in."

Logan stepped into the house and glanced around, but stopped when he looked up the small flight of stairs and saw Melody. He smiled. She wore a white dress with bright blue flowers printed on it. The dress fell modestly to her knee. Over top of the dress was a flimsy, see-through type jacket deal that was the same blue as the flowers on the dress and the same length as the dress. She wore white heels and a bright smile. "Wow, Melody. You look amazing," he said softly.

"Thanks," she said shyly.

"You do look pretty," her father said.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Hello!" Carol Keith said as she came from the kitchen.

"Hi, Mrs. Keith," Logan said. "It's nice to see you again."

"You too. You look so handsome in your suit."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Carol glanced at her daughter. "Sweetie, you look so beautiful."

"Thanks, Mom, and thanks for helping me find this dress."

"Oh, it was fun, wasn't it? To go out shopping just the two of us. We haven't done that in a while."

"It was fun. And thanks for helping me with my hair."

"I've always loved playing with your hair. You're like my little baby doll."

Melody laughed and came to stand next to Logan. Phil and Lyle came charging down the stairs behind her.

Logan smiled at the guys. "Hey, guys."

"Hey," Lyle said.

"Hey, Logan," Phil said.

Logan nodded at Phil. "I heard you had a great game."

He grimaced. "Except we lost."

"Yeah, I heard that too."

"Melody told you already?" he asked.

"No, JoJo and I looked it up this morning."

"JoJo was interested in my game?" Phil asked.

Logan smiled. "You're the brother of the girl I'm, uh, dating, and he's my brother, so, he was interested."

"I told you it was a date," Lyle said quickly to his brother.

"One date doesn't mean they're dating," Phil replied.

Logan smiled. "Well, hopefully, if I do okay today, I'm gonna see if she'll go out with me again."

"Okay, well, let's get going. You have to get set up," Melody said quickly.

She moved forward and kissed her mother's cheek. "Bye Mom, bye Dad." She smiled at her brothers. "Bye, guys."

Logan shook hands with the boys and her father and mother and walked Melody out to his car.

He smiled at her as he opened the car door for her. "You really do look beautiful, Melody."

"Thank you."

Logan looked up at the rumble of an engine and watched as the yellow Mustang drove slowly by her house. His eyes narrowed. "Looks like your ex is stalking you."

Melody looked over her shoulder and frowned. She couldn't suppress the shudder that shook her body for a few seconds. Logan didn't miss the reaction.

"Melody? Are you okay?"

She smiled. "I'm fine. So, how far is the church from here?"

Logan watched the Mustang disappear down the street. "Um, it's about a thirty-minute drive." He closed her door and went around and got in.

"I wonder if I can do anything to help since we're gonna be there early."

"I bet they can find something for you to do if you want to help. Aunt Bree will be there, and so will Mrs. Copeland and I'm sure they could use your help. I'd get you to help me, but I don't think you can lift the equipment."

"Probably not, cuz we wouldn't want me to accidentally drop it down a flight of stairs," she said with a giggle.

He laughed. "No, we wouldn't. Been there, done that."

✝✝✝

Melody had been having a great deal of fun. It was fun to be one of the first people at the church to help with setting up everything. It was fun to watch the Kino and Adams families work together without complaint to bring about this lovely wedding for two kids they'd pretty much adopted as their own. They laughed as they worked. Some of them sang as they worked. She too was working, helping set out flower arrangements or arrange tables and chairs in the large reception hall, which also served as a gymnasium.

When she had a chance she went back into the gym to watch Logan and JoJo set up amps and speakers and lights and a drum set. JoJo gave a short demonstration of his skills on the drums, which totally thrilled Melody.

"He's good, isn't he?" Logan said as he joined her for a minute.

She nodded. "There's something about a drummer," she said with a sigh.

Logan's eyebrows rose. "Well, then, that's enough of that." He tried to usher her out of the gym.

She giggled. "There's something even more about a singer, one who can play so many instruments, write music, and touch our souls."

He stopped. Smiled. "Okay, you can stay."

She laughed. "Actually, I have to go back to the kitchen. I told your mom I'd supervise the people who are setting up the tables with tablecloths and centerpieces and stuff. I have a checklist and all, so I have to go and take care of that."

"Are the bride and groom here yet?" Logan asked.

"I think they were just arriving when I came in here."

Melody smiled at Logan's dad as he walked by pushing a large dust mop. He nodded. "Melody." He frowned. "Logan, I believe you have things you need to do."

Logan smiled. "Yes, sir." He looked back at Melody. "I guess we both need to get to work."

She nodded and headed out.

She'd been hard at work in the kitchen for at least an hour when Taylor came to find her. "There you are, Melody!"

"Hi Taylor!"

"You are wanted in the bridal room."

"Oh! Is Miss Shelley here with the children?"

Taylor shook her head. "Not yet. Though she'll be here soon with Angelina."

"Oh, then who needs me?"

Taylor frowned. "Melody, you know you're more than just someone who

works for our grandparents. We see you as one of the family."

Melody's face reddened. "Okay, well, that's a really sweet thing to say."

"I said it because it's the truth. And the one asking for you we also see as a member of the family."

"Who is it?"

"It's the bride."

"What does she need?"

Taylor stopped at the door, turned and looked at Melody. "She doesn't need anything. She just wanted to see you." She smiled at her, opened the door and went in.

"There she is," Jordan said.

Melody smiled at everyone as she entered the room. Jordan sat in a chair, her hair being curled by someone Melody didn't know. Charity was standing behind Desi, who stood in front of a full-length mirror. They both turned to smile at and speak to Melody.

Also in the room were the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom, seated in chairs while having their hair styled. Both smiled at Melody.

"Oh wow, Desi," Melody said. "Your dress is amazing!"

"Hey, Melody! Yeah, isn't it? Mrs. Kino helped me pick it out a few weeks ago, and she's got really good taste."

"Mrs. Kino, Taylor's mom or grandmother?"

Desi smiled. "Taylor's mom. She's been so sweet to me."

"And look at you, Melody," Jordan said. "Don't you just look so pretty. I love your dress."

Melody smiled. "Thanks. I had to rush out and buy something and I wasn't sure what to get."

"Well, ya did good," Taylor said.

"So, Desi, Taylor said you needed to see me?"

"Yes, I was wondering where you were. I mean, you're part of this group. I'm sorry I didn't ask you to be a bridesmaid, but when Mrs. Kino and I planned the wedding, I didn't know you. But since we spent the day together yesterday, and you're one of the young ones, like us, I wanted you to be here with me."

"Okay, that's very kind of you," Melody said. "But don't worry. It's not like I felt left out."

"Yeah, how could you when you came here with one of the hottest guys in the nation," Charity said. She laughed at her mother's surprised look. "I mean, I'm the one left out. I don't have a hot date. And why are you looking at me like that, Mom? Have you seen Logan Adams?"

"Well, actually, I don't know everyone yet," Marvenia Copeland said with a shrug. "But if you say he's hot, then I believe you."

The ladies giggled.

"Charity, as you walk back up the aisle after the ceremony, you get to walk with another hot guy," Jordan said.

"Oh, yeah, with JoJo Adams. I did an internet search on him. He's Logan's

brother and he's a Heisman candidate and will probably go pro. And from the pics online, he looks really adorable. Too bad he's so young."

Taylor giggled. "Well, he IS very mature for his age. He's always been the serious one."

"And he plays the drums," Melody added.

They all looked at her.

"He gave a small demo once he got the drums set up in the reception room. He's like, really good at it."

"Drummers are hot," Jordan said.

"Right?" Melody agreed.

The girls giggled again.

"Melody, step over here a minute. I want to tell you something privately," Desi said.

The two girls went over near the entrance to a bathroom.

Desi smiled at Melody and looked into her eyes. "I really wanted you in here because you and I are alike."

Melody's brows furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"The Kinos found you working in a restaurant. They found me at a gas station. Yes, I was homeless and you were just working, but still—these amazing, kind, wonderful people chose us. They chose to help us. They decided they were gonna change our lives. We are so lucky. I mean, you told me yesterday that you were in a place working a job you hate, not knowing what path to take in your life. You said you felt lost, right?"

Melody nodded. "Right. I mean, I have a home and a family, but I felt alienated from them. My parents try hard to provide for us, but things have always been tight. I wouldn't have a car to drive if I hadn't been working since I was fifteen. I felt like life had nothing to offer. And my parents were pushing me to go to college and I didn't want to go into debt for like, forty thousand dollars to get a degree when I didn't even know what to pursue. I worked with a lot of people who had degrees and couldn't find a job and they were servers or cooks in a restaurant just like me. *AND* they were in debt up to their eyeballs. So, yeah, I felt lost, and Miss Shelley has given me a completely new outlook on life, and also helped me to renew my faith. I feel like a new person."

"Yep, and that's exactly how I feel. I'm so grateful. I mean, it's Miss Shelley's daughter who has taken me under her wing, and she's made me feel like a new person and I'm not even talking about the financial help. It's like, I see everything differently. I even love my mother and father and sister differently, I mean, like, more than I ever used to. I appreciate everything so much more. Mrs. Kino says that's not because of her but because of what I've been through, but I'm telling you, it's because of her. Her and God. She's helped me to see my faith in a whole new light. Really, not just her. The whole family. And Jordan too. She's so awesome."

Melody smiled. "She is. And she's so in love with Eric."

Desi nodded. "They are so cute together. So, what about you and Logan?"

"What about it? I mean, it's only our first date."

"You don't have any feelings for him at all?"

Melody smiled. "He's really sweet. I think about him a lot, even when he's not around. Even before he asked me out. He actually asked me to watch Taylor's homecoming parade with him and I did, but I had to go right home. And whenever the family is doing stuff together, he always sits by me. I'm not sure what that means."

"Uh, it means he likes you, silly."

"How could he? He barely even knows me."

Desi shrugged. "Well, I barely know you and I really like you. Or like Taylor says, I just love you already."

Melody giggled. "That Taylor. I just love her too. Such a good person."

"I agree." She sighed. "So, I'm just sayin', me and you, we are both blessed to be chosen by the Kino family and I've been told that once that happens, we are theirs for life. So, you and me, we are special and I wanted you to know that and I wanted you to be a part of my very special day."

Melody smiled and her eyes filled with tears. "Thank you, Desi. I think you and I are gonna be great friends."

Desi grinned. "I think so too." She frowned. "You've got some dirt or something right here." She reached up and touched Melody's cheek.

Melody gasped and covered her cheek. "Oh, yeah, I was moving tables and probably got dusty. I'll go clean that." She turned and hurried into the bathroom.

✝✝✝

"There you are," Logan said as he approached Melody with a smile. "Thought I'd lost you."

Melody smiled. "No such luck. I got called into the bride's dressing room and then got delayed with pictures."

"Well, I'm sure you stole the show."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah."

He moved right in front of her and took both her hands in his. "I'm serious. Melody, you are beautiful."

She blushed. "Thank you." She looked up at him as he stood so close. Were his shoulders always that big? He seemed very large right now. She looked up at him, his strong jaw, his straight nose, his blue eyes, his light brown hair. He was so very good-looking. A hottie, as Charity would say. He let go of one of her hands and reached up and took a lock of her hair between his thumb and forefinger and studied it.

"Your hair looks nice all down instead of up in your usual ponytail."

"You don't like my ponytail?"

He smiled. "I love your ponytail. It's very cute. But this looks nice too. Your hair is so shiny and soft."

She gave a short laugh as he tugged slightly on the lock of hair.

Logan didn't laugh because he was mesmerized by her. Standing so close to her, he could see the different colors in her beautiful eyes. Some green, a

tiny bit of blue, and some brown flecks and a thin circle of black around the entire iris. He could smell her perfume or maybe shampoo or something. He leaned forward to breathe in the scent of her hair, and the thought struck him: with just a slight shift, he could kiss her. He drew a breath. It was too soon for that. Or was it? The attraction was evident. His whole body felt drawn to her. He just wanted to get close. He looked from her eyes to her lips and back to her eyes, took another deep breath and stepped back.

He cleared his throat. "Um, my mom just got here and brought us a little something to eat since we've been here for hours and the ceremony won't start until noon." He held up an insulated lunch bag.

She drew a breath and nodded. "That's very thoughtful of your mom. Where shall we go to eat it?"

He looked around. "I was thinking, there's a little bench out under a tree on the side of the building. It's quiet there. Whaddya say?"

"Sounds good."

They made their way to the bench and sat down.

"Let's see what she packed," Logan said.

He unzipped the bag and pulled out two cold bottles of cucumber-pear juice, a container of grapes, a package of smoked cheeses and almonds, some organic summer sausage, and finally, two large organic chocolate bars.

He smiled. "Whaddya think?"

She gave a soft laugh. "I think your mom is very sweet and thoughtful and cares a lot about your health."

He nodded. "Yep." He closed his eyes. "Father, thank you for this food and we ask your blessing upon it in Jesus' name."

"Amen," she said softly.

He opened the package of cheeses and almonds and the summer sausage slices, popped an almond into his mouth, placed a slice of the sausage in between two pieces of cheese, and handed it to her.

She accepted and took a bite. "Hmm, this is really good."

He made one for himself and put the whole thing in his mouth. "Umm, yes it is. It really hits the spot—or maybe I'm just really hungry."

"Did you eat breakfast this morning?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes, right after our training."

"Training?"

"Yeah, we train with my father every morning, except Sundays. We have a workout room downstairs. You'll have to come over one day and see. It's not a giant estate like the grands' home, but it's nice."

"I'd like to do that."

"Cool. And you'll have to come to dinner one day. Uh, that's what my mom says, and I agree with her."

"I'd like that too. And of course, you remember my father said the same thing, so, I guess once you get back from your Thanksgiving trip, we'll have to plan it."

He smiled. "Absolutely."

They made short work of the food with Logan eating the lion's share. He then opened one of the chocolate bars and handed it to her. He watched her closely as she broke off one of the squares and placed it in her mouth.

She sighed. "So good."

"Can't go wrong with chocolate," Logan agreed.

"Aren't you gonna eat yours?"

He shook his head. "Not now. I'll just have a piece of yours and save the other for later."

She broke off a piece and he opened his mouth and she placed it on his tongue. He chewed and smiled. "Thanks."

She watched his mouth and then swallowed hard and looked away. What in the world was she thinking? She thought of Cade and how she felt toward him when she'd first met him. He was cute. And popular. And very friendly. He really liked her and told her he was gonna be her boyfriend almost immediately and she saw no reason to disagree. They had a good time together. But she never watched him so intently as she did Logan. She never felt her stomach jump or her heart race when he looked at her. But everything Logan did intrigued her. She watched him chew his chocolate and thought about that same mouth moving as he spoke, or even better, as he sang.

She thought about the way his lips pressed together the other day as he spoke to Cade. The fierce expression in his eyes, it was very intimidating. Logan was a 3rd degree black belt and a student of Kino Martial Arts, and if he was anything like his cousin Eric, she was sure he would make short work of Cade. She thought about how frightened she was last night when Cade kissed her and held her against her will. They'd essentially been in public and he was that brazen. What would he do if he caught her alone?

"You okay?"

She blinked. "Oh, yeah. My mind drifted off."

He frowned. "Am I that boring?"

"Not boring at all. Just thought-provoking."

"Well, we'd better head back inside. I have to sing before the processional and I need to warm up a bit."

She nodded. "I'm looking forward to hearing you sing."

"I'm looking forward to singing for you."

✝✝✝

Melody glanced around as the church began to fill up. For it being a last-minute ceremony, there were an awful lot of people here, she thought. Probably mostly people who attended this church and knew Desi's family. And also there were a lot of young people, so Melody thought they were the people who had gone to high school with Alec and Desi. After all, she'd been a cheerleader and he'd been senior class president, so they were probably pretty popular. Melody noted that several men in black suits with the Ameritech seal on the breast pockets filed in and stood along the side walls of the church.

Then there was a large murmuring of the congregation and she looked back to see Ricky and Bree Kino walk in together. They stopped several times to

greet people. Melody knew once they sat down the rest of the people milling around outside would come in and take their seats.

She watched as Miss Shelley and Grandmaster Kino and four of their five children came in and took their seats. Then Mark and Bella Adams with their little Emily and right behind them, Joey and Breez Adams with their Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger. Jeffy and Cam with their baby in a carrier and Kimmie Lee with her husband Jensen walked down the aisle, and right behind them was Jason Lee and his wife, Angel.

Melody turned back in time to see Logan rise, strap on a classical guitar and move to the front. He strummed, bent down and turned something on the amp and strummed again then faced the congregation. Melody thought he was about to sing, but instead, he took her breath away as he played an amazing and intricate guitar solo of "From this Moment On" by Shania Twain. People immediately started coming in and finding their seats. By the time he finished the instrumental, everyone was seated and gazing up at him reverently.

He got to the last chord of the song, and stepped closer to the microphone and then melted her heart as he began to sing the words to the song. She'd never realized it was such a beautiful song with beautiful words. The song spoke about life beginning at the moment they are together, as one, belonging beside each other ... so beautiful.

Melody got a notice on her phone and glanced down at it. It was from Gabe's website that he was live. She looked around, but didn't see Gabe, then she noticed that Mrs. Kino, Breanna Adams, had her phone out and pointed at Logan. Melody smiled. Logan finished singing and you could have heard a pin drop. She wanted to burst into wild applause, but she guessed it wouldn't be appropriate.

He took off the guitar and a woman seated herself at the piano and the processional began. The pastor entered from the side and waited at the front of the church. Melody smiled as Alec walked down the aisle with his mother, Ivana Morgan, on his arm. He took her to her place on the front right side of the aisle and then took his place up front. Next, JoJo Adams had been recruited to escort Mrs. Copeland down the aisle, and as the bride's mother, seat her in the front pew of the church on the left. He then went to stand near Alec. Next, the groomsmen entered—Gabe first, followed by young Eric, the best man. They were very handsome in their black suits each with a bright blue tie and Melody realized that Logan too, wore the same color tie. She also realized that she matched them in her blue floral dress.

Next, the bridesmaids came down the aisle, Taylor and Jordan, wearing lovely gowns of soft pink. Their hair was down, Taylor's now almost to her waist, and Jordan's to the middle of her back. They were beautiful and Melody could tell that everyone else thought so too, as there was a strong murmur when they started down the aisle. Jordan on her crutches and Taylor walking slowly in front of her. Charity, the bride's sister and maid of honor, followed Jordan. Bree Kino had been able to procure a beautiful dress for her in the same color pink though it wasn't quite the same style as Jordan's and Taylor's.

Next, Melody held her breath to see if little Angelina Kino would be able to come down the aisle on her own. She saw Desi nod at Angelina and whisper to her. The beautiful child smiled and started down the aisle, very carefully and precisely spreading handfuls of pink rose petals on the floor as she went by. It took her a while, but she finally accomplished it.

When Angelina took her seat with her mother, the music changed and Pastor Frank asked everyone to stand.

Melody looked Desi over as she started down the aisle with her arm linked with her father. It was such a miracle. Just a week ago, Desi had planned to have Mr. Kino escort her down the aisle. But this was so much better. Desi looked beautiful. Her white dress had an empire waist and had several layers of ruffles. Even though everyone knew Desi was pretty far along in her pregnancy, it was really hard to tell. Her silky blonde hair was stick straight. The hairstylist had it taken up on the sides and arranged flowers spilling down the back. She needed no veil, for her sleek hair fell down her back like a sheet of satin.

Desi's eyes locked with Alec's. He smiled at her. She smiled in return. They got to the front and Mr. Copeland smiled at Alec, shook his hand, and then placed Destiny's hand in Alec's. He kissed his daughter's cheek and went to sit next to his wife.

Melody looked up at the sight. Alec looked very handsome standing there with young Eric next to him, then Gabe and then JoJo.

Desi was so beautiful as she turned to face Alec. She handed her bouquet to Charity behind her. Beside Charity were Jordan and then Taylor.

Melody glanced up at Logan and found him looking at her. She smiled and he winked at her, making her heart jump and her face turn pink.

Melody tried to listen to the ceremony, but every time she looked at Logan, he was looking at her. She'd look up at him, and he'd quickly look away. It was so distracting. Next thing she knew, Desi and Alec were saying their vows, which she barely heard, and exchanging their rings and then the lady was at the piano again and the wedding party exited the church and headed to the gymnasium turned reception hall.

Logan was at her side in seconds. "Well, that was fun," he said.

She smiled. "Logan, you were so awesome. I didn't realize you could play the guitar like that. And then, when you sang, oh my goodness, it was so good. So good. I mean, you actually made me lightheaded."

He smiled and nodded his head. "That's good to know."

"Why?" she asked.

"Oh, it's always good to know how to make your girl, I mean your date, lightheaded."

He'd almost called her his girl. She felt like she *was* gonna faint.

"So, I'm just waiting for the rest of the people to get out of the way and then I need to carry the amp into the reception. Would you mind carrying my guitar for me?"

"Don't mind at all. More like, honored."

Logan drew a deep breath at the compliment. They were swamped for a few minutes as people made their way toward him to tell him how good he was. He thanked people, took selfies with them, and even signed a few autographs.

Melody smiled. "You do that so naturally, like you've been doing it your whole life."

He shrugged. "I'm new to this, but I've been around people who've had to do it their whole lives and so I guess I learned. It still blows me away that someone wants an autograph or a picture."

"Pretty soon, it won't surprise you at all. It'll be old hat."

He chuckled. "I hope it never feels that way."

They made their way into the reception hall where music was already playing and a DJ was handling the playlist.

Logan got his amp plugged up and his guitar on a stand and went straight back to Melody. "Would you like something to eat or drink?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine right now."

"Hmm, cheap date," he murmured.

She giggled.

The DJ announced Mr. and Mrs. Alec Morgan and called them to the floor to dance the first dance. Etta James' "At Last" sounded over the speakers and everyone applauded the couple. Then the music changed and Mr. Copeland was invited to dance with his daughter and Mrs. Morgan to dance with her son. The music changed again, and everyone was invited to dance.

"Will you dance with me?" Logan asked.

Melody nodded and he took her hand and led her out to the dance floor.

The music was slow and he slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close. She looked up into his eyes and he smiled at her and then frowned. "What's this? I think you have some dirt on your face," he said.

She looked down immediately. "I'll, uh, go see about it in a minute. Just, dance with me."

"Okay." He held her tighter as he spun around with her in his arms and then slowed again.

Melody kept her head down for the rest of the dance and as soon as the song was over she excused herself, grabbed her purse from their table and headed to the restroom. He watched her go.

Taylor and Gabe came up beside him. "Did you say something to upset her?" Gabe asked.

Logan shook his head. "I don't think so. But she does seem a little jumpy."

Gabe jiggled Taylor's hand. "You wanna go check on her?"

Taylor nodded. "Sure. Be right back."

In the restroom Melody stared into the mirror, rubbing her cheek. The bruise was getting darker, but still, if she put enough makeup on it, she should be able to conceal it. She started dabbing the makeup on, but used too much and it looked ridiculous. She wet a paper towel and wiped her cheek clean so she could start over.

"What happened to your face?" Taylor asked as she came up behind her.

Melody practically jumped out of her shoes. “Good grief, you scared me,” she scolded.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to. I thought you heard me come in. So, what happened?”

Melody swallowed. She looked into Taylor’s eyes. “I, uh, I hit my face on the cabinet door in my bathroom.”

Taylor looked closely at her face, and then at her hands, which were trembling. She sighed. “Well, I have this great concealer.” She opened her purse and pulled out a makeup bag. She worked on Melody’s face for a few minutes and then stepped back with a smile. “There. You can’t see a thing.”

Melody smiled. “Thanks, Taylor. Really.”

“Yeah, you’re welcome. But Melody, I don’t buy for a minute that you hit the cabinet door.”

Melody looked down.

“Melody, if you’re in trouble, if someone is hurting you, you can tell me. Or Logan. There are so many people in this family that you can turn to.”

She nodded. “I know, but it’s not like that really. It was a one-time thing.”

“When did it happen?”

“Last night, and I’m not gonna say anything else so please don’t ask me.”

Taylor sighed. “Okay. For now. But if you need or want to talk to someone, I might seem young, but I’m a good listener.”

Melody smiled. “I can totally see that.”

✞✞✞

Job 6:14

“He who withholds kindness from a friend
forsakes the fear of the Almighty.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

The reception was a load of fun. It was so much fun to watch the bride and groom dance and laugh and act so carefree. Mr. Kino had told them to name three wishes, and two of the three had already come true. The only wish that hadn't was Desi's wish to graduate from high school, and she intended to take care of that soon.

Gabe and Taylor performed a dance they'd worked out for the couple and of course were a huge hit. Young Eric danced a few times with Charity and even danced a couple of slow dances with Jordan, simply swaying back and forth while holding her close. JoJo also danced a few times with Charity and in between went into service mode, helping with Emily so his dad could dance with his mom, and helping with Sophia, Kelstyn and Ledger so his uncle could dance with his aunt. Melody and Logan danced almost every dance and in between sat at their table and talked.

Sometimes their conversation was more serious, like about life goals or faith, and sometimes it was light, and Logan would make her laugh. He'd just made her laugh again and now sat back, admiring her smile and the twinkle in her eye.

"I love the way you laugh," he said.

She laughed again. "My mom says my laugh is very unladylike."

He thought about that and then shook his head. "No, I think it's very feminine, very natural." He pulled out his phone when it buzzed. "Well, I gotta go to work."

"Work?"

He smiled. "It's time for me to go do a few numbers. The good part is, me and the boys, we're gettin' the band back together for tonight."

"The band?"

"Yeah, so, back when young Eric and JoJo and I were teenagers, we had a little band."

"So, when I watched you set up earlier, it was for your uh, boy band?"

He smiled. "Well, yes, but I'm averse to calling us a boy band."

She giggled.

"Jo played drums, I played guitar—mostly—and young Eric played bass. So, we're gonna do a couple of numbers for the bride and groom, except we're adding our newest member of the band, Gabe. Back in September, we found out Gabe could sing and we had him join us when we sang for Aunt Bree and Taylor's joint birthday party. It was a huge hit."

Melody nodded. "I think I saw clips of that on social media."

"You probably did. Some of those videos have over three hundred million views. Gabe is crazy popular." He rose. "So, before I leave, can I get you something? Some punch or a plate of goodies?"

She nodded. "I'm really thirsty, so some punch would be great."

He fetched her a cup of punch and then headed toward the little stage area. Melody drank her punch and watched as the other guys joined him. She was surprised to see Jeffy take a seat at the piano. Taylor and Jordan and Charity came back to the table to watch the performance, loaded with plates of goodies and cups of punch.

"Hello, everyone," Logan said into the mic. "I'm Logan Adams and I've been asked to sing a special song for Desi and for Desi's mom and dad, because when she was little she used to sing this song with them. I'm told she did it very dramatically."

Everyone laughed.

"As a matter of fact, I was wondering if we could get Desi up here to sing with us."

"Absolutely not," she answered loudly.

"Aww, come on," he prodded.

"Not gonna happen," she said.

Logan smiled. "Okay. I get it. I'll sing it alone. And for this number, I'm very happy to have my Aunt Jeffy, Dr. June Flower Kino Wallace up here. She has graciously agreed to play for me on this first song, so I don't have to sit behind the piano."

Logan nodded at Jeffy and she began to play. Her command of the piano was surprising. Most people didn't know that Jeffy had reached concert-pianist level by the time she was eight years old. Studying music had helped her organize the otherwise haphazard thoughts of her brilliant mind.

The music coming from the piano was so beautiful that Logan didn't even need to sing, but after a very long intro, he put the mic to his mouth and began the opening of *Unchained Melody*. "Oh—my darlin'..."

The entire place was dead silent. Logan's voice seemed to take people's breath away. How could anyone sing so beautifully? His voice stroked each word of the song, making the women and girls in the room sigh. Taylor was live-streaming on Gabe's social media and her phone was blowing up as people began commenting.

When he finished the final note, Jeffy took over, ending the song with a flourish on the piano.

Everyone jumped to their feet. Desi and many others had to wipe tears from their eyes.

"Thank you very much," Logan said into the mic. He went to the piano and held out his hand and helped Jeffy to her feet and kissed her cheek. "Let's hear it for my beautiful Aunt Jeffy," he said and there was another huge round of applause. "She's gonna stick around and help us with a few more numbers tonight." He flashed a quick smile. "So, that song was called *Unchained Melody*, you probably already know that, but I thought I'd point it out, because

coincidentally, my date tonight, her name is Melody." He glanced at her.

Melody blushed as she looked around the table at the girls who were making "oooo" sounds and teasing her.

Logan picked up an electric guitar and lifted the strap over his head. "Okay, so, the boys and I, I call them my brothers, we got the band back together to honor our friends, Alec and Destiny Morgan and we have a few numbers to do for you. Gabe Tanner is our newest member..." He had to stop for a minute while everyone applauded. Gabe grinned his boyish grin and waved his hand in the air, then adjusted the mic stand. Alec's and Desi's friends who were all Gabe's age and followed him on social media were making a lot of noise for him. "Yeah," Logan continued, "we're glad to have Gabe with us. You might have seen his performance back in September, though he danced more than he sang. Gabe is the current Mini-MART champ." He waited through another round of loud applause. "And he's gonna sing for us a little bit tonight. Also with us, on bass, is Eric Kino, the third, the reigning champion of the Kino Challenge..."

Logan had to stop talking again as Eric got a huge ovation. Young Eric smiled and nodded as he plucked a few notes on his bass. "By the way, Eric's movie is coming out next month, so be sure to look for it. It's called *The Resurrection of Elijah Beck*." Logan turned and nodded toward the drums. "And last but certainly not least, thanks to USC having a double bye this year, before the big game next week against UCLA, their quarterback has agreed to fulfill his role in the band, my brother and Heisman candidate, JoJo Adams!"

Again, the place went wild. JoJo grinned and waved his sticks in the air from where he sat behind the drums and then played a quick fill.

"Okay, so here we go. Alec loves rock n' roll, so this is for you, man."

Logan strummed his guitar a moment, nodded at the guys and counted it off. "One, two, three." The immediately recognizable opening notes of "Johnny B. Goode" sent the place into a frenzy. One would have thought it couldn't get any louder until Gabe moved forward and belted out the first two lines of the opening verse. Then Logan leaned toward his mic and joined him on the next two lines and next all the guys came in on the chorus.

Logan went back to the guitar riff and the place went wild. Jeffy was jammin' out on the jazz piano, JoJo was beating the drums, young Eric was lookin' very cool on the bass and Gabe was singing his heart out.

It was a great time and when the song ended, everyone was on their feet.

Melody felt like she was in heaven watching Logan do his thing. She was on her feet like everyone else, dancing in place, waving her arms in the air, letting loose and having a blast. They were working up a sweat and for the third time a guy carrying a tray of cups filled with punch stopped by the table and again, all the girls grabbed a glass and drank it down.

The band's next number was "Stayin' Alive," which included a little dance solo for Gabe that sent the girls into the stratosphere. And the last number ended with the whole place jumping up and down to *Shout.*

The guys put their instruments down. JoJo escorted his Aunt Jeffy off the

stage. The others headed to the table where Jordan, Taylor, and Melody sat. When they arrived at the table the girls congratulated them on a job well done. But the guys all had a puzzled look on their faces.

Gabe kissed Taylor and looked down at her with a frown. "Tay, have you been drinking?"

She giggled. "If you mean, alcohol, no, if you mean some of that strawberry banana punch, yes."

Gabe glanced over at young Eric and Logan. Young Eric picked up one of the cups of punch and smelled it, then looked up with a grimace. "Guys, someone has spiked the punch."

"Well, that *would* kinda be funny," Logan said. "Except we don't want our parents to be in trouble for not supervising the party well enough and allowing underage drinking, and there are little kids here."

Young Eric looked at Jordan. "Did you drink any punch?"

She grinned and nodded. "I had two glasses and I do feel a little buzzed."

Eric went immediately to the punch table and instructed the attendants to empty the bowls and bring out a different batch. He then went to report the incident to his parents.

Logan pulled Melody to her feet and she giggled. "Uh, how many glasses of punch have you had?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. I was so thirsty. Maybe three or four."

"Do you feel funny?"

She giggled. "Describe funny."

He smiled. "Intoxication."

"Oooh, I'm thinking that may be a distinct possibility."

"Okay, well, we'd better get you sobered up."

She put her arms up around his neck. "Or, we could go somewhere."

"Where do you want to go?"

She sighed. "To heaven."

He frowned. She was definitely intoxicated.

"Because that's where I am when I'm with you," she explained.

He blew out a breath. "That's sweet, and I'm right there with ya, but I can't return you to your parents with their daughter drunk."

"Then don't. Take me to your house. Take me to your bed."

Taylor and Jordan both giggled.

"Um, so, she's had a lot more to drink than we have," Jordan said.

Gabe chuckled. "Logan, my brother, it looks like you have quite a problem on your hands."

"What's the problem?" young Eric asked as he returned.

"Melody is pretty far gone," Gabe explained. "And asking Logan to take her to his bed."

Eric coughed and then laughed.

"I don't see what's so funny," Melody said. "It's perfectly logical. He doesn't want my parents to see me when I'm not sober and I have to sleep it off somewhere, right? So take me to bed."

"Melody, the problem is, I have to take you home. Your parents will be expecting you, and they'll be expecting you to be sober."

"Well, Logan," young Eric began. "Start with some water and keep a close eye on her." He looked at Jordan and Taylor. "And you two as well. I'll go get some water."

Melody swayed against Logan.

"Come on, hon, sit down," Logan said kindly.

"Okay, but I suddenly don't feel too good."

"You mean, like nausea?" Logan asked.

"If she's already sick, we probably should notify Aunt Jeffy to make sure it's not worse than we think," young Eric said.

"I'd better go get Aunt Jeffy," Logan said quickly. "Watch her."

Melody jumped to her feet. "I gotta go." She stumbled toward the bathroom.

"I'll go with her," Taylor said as she chased after Melody.

In the restroom Taylor held Melody's hair back for her while she was sick.

Melody went to the sink and rinsed her mouth and stared into the mirror. "Taylor," Melody began. "Did I really just ask Logan to take me to his bed?"

Taylor grimaced. "You want the truth?"

Melody sighed. "That's what I thought." She whimpered. "Ugh, why did I say that?"

Taylor shrugged. "As you said, it was perfectly logical."

Melody grimaced. "I can't believe I'm on my first date with Logan and said those words and now I've thrown up. What I wouldn't give for a toothbrush and toothpaste to clean my mouth."

Taylor smiled. "Don't cry, Melody. There's a whole pack of toothbrushes in the bride room. I'll be right back."

While Taylor was gone, Melody worked on repairing the makeup on her cheek, but it wasn't working too well. She needed some more of Taylor's expensive concealer and face powder. She looked closely at her face, stroking her finger over the bruise on her cheek, remembering the fear she'd felt that Cade would actually hurt her. She shuddered. It wasn't long before Taylor came back.

"I found something even better," Taylor said. She handed her a little kit with toothbrush and toothpaste and mouthwash and ibuprofen and antacids and safety pins and feminine products.

Melody brushed her teeth and splashed cold water on her face. She smiled at Taylor. "Thank you so much, Taylor. You are the best."

"You're welcome. Are you feeling better? I mean, not so drunk anymore?"

"I'm pretty tipsy, but no more nausea. Don't know why I got sick. I mean, I'm not used to drinking, but I thought you don't get sick until the next day."

Taylor shrugged. "I don't know much about it. But, I guess your body is trying to tell you something."

Melody looked in the mirror and grimaced. "Taylor, could I borrow your concealer again?"

"Sure. Let me do it for you." Taylor worked on Melody's face. "So, maybe now you can tell me what happened to your cheek."

Melody shrugged. "I guess it's no big secret that I need to keep. I just didn't want Logan to find out. It was my ex-boyfriend. He broke up with me right before my senior year in high school, because he was going off to college and didn't want to be held back by his little high school girlfriend."

"Cold."

"Yeah, but like, I kind of understood, even though it did break my heart. Then, once I was pretty much over him, he started coming back to see me, trying to get me to go out with him again."

"Okay. And you're not interested?"

"No. I mean, he used to be a nice guy, but he's changed. And also, right there at the end, right before he broke up with me, he started pressuring me to go all the way with him."

"Hmm, not good."

Melody nodded. "So, last night I went to see my brother play football and I was standing in line at the concession stand, and Cade showed up and grabbed me and pulled me out of line and over to the side of the concession building. It's really all a blur to me now, but we argued. He wants me to go out with him and he wants me to have sex with him and he's not taking 'no' for an answer. He wouldn't let me leave. I told him I was there with my parents and he actually said he could take my father out with one punch."

Taylor's mouth fell open.

"Right? And then he grabbed my face and kissed me."

"Oh." Taylor frowned. "So, that bruise, it's a fingerprint."

Melody nodded as tears welled in her eyes. "A thumbprint, yeah."

Taylor looked into her eyes. "Oh, Melody, bless your heart." She put her arms around her and hugged her, then pulled away. "And you don't want to tell Logan?"

She sniffed. "No. He might go after him."

"There's no 'might' to it," Taylor said.

"Well, what if he gets hurt?"

"Logan?" Taylor rolled her eyes.

Melody sighed. "Okay, well, what if he gets arrested for hurting Cade? I mean, there's so much that could go wrong. And if he fights Cade and wins, which I realize he probably would, it won't stop Cade. He'll come after me even harder. I keep hoping he'll just give up and leave me alone."

Taylor frowned. "Those are all problems, Melody, but you have to know that Logan will figure them out. Or his father will. Or my father will. Or Granddad will. I mean, you have a whole lot of people that can figure out the best thing for this situation. You should talk to someone about it."

"I, I just need time to think about that, about what to do or who to talk to. For now though, it's my first real date with Logan and I don't want to mess it up with this stupid thing. I just want to enjoy being out with Logan. I mean, it took him forever to ask me out."

Taylor smiled. "So, you're interested in him?"

She sighed. "Interested is an understatement. I mean, he makes me feel so, I don't even know. I mean, he's so kind. He's so thoughtful. He's so smart and talented. When he's not around, which is most of the time, I think about him. Just the way he smiles at me, it's like, well, like I'm actually someone important, like I'm a real person."

Taylor frowned. "You are important, Melody. And you are a real person. And it sounds like you really like him. Like, a lot."

She smiled. "I really do."

"Well, I can't speak for him, but I know him well enough to know that he really likes you too. He says you're gorgeous."

"Really?"

"Yeah. That's what he said back at the memorial. He said you were freakin' gorgeous. But it's not just your looks." She pulled away and looked Melody over. "There. I think we have the bruise covered up."

"Thank you so much, Taylor."

"You're welcome, again. But listen, don't take too long to think about things, ya know, about this Cade guy. You have backup, girlfriend. So much backup. My family is like an army of backup."

Melody nodded. "Let's go back out there before they come looking for us."

They headed back out to the table and Jeffy came to see about Melody. She looked into her eyes, put a hand to her forehead, and jerked it back quickly.

"What?" Melody asked.

Jeffy shook her head and touched Melody's cheek right on the spot where the bruise was. She raised her eyebrows. "*You* know what."

Melody blinked, her expression pained.

"We'll talk tomorrow. You still have alcohol in your system, and only time will clear it. However, you're not showing signs of alcohol poisoning. You need to keep drinking water, and someone needs to stay with you until you're sober."

"Yes, ma'am," Melody mumbled.

Gabe leaned over to Taylor and whispered in her ear. "Do you know what that's all about?"

Taylor looked up into his eyes and sighed. "Um, well..."

"Tay, tell me."

"I can't. I sort of promised."

"Is she in danger? Is she sick?"

"Um, maybe. I promise I'll fill you in a little bit later."

Gabe frowned. "You will fill me in before the night is over," Gabe insisted.

Taylor realized it wasn't a request, but an order. "Okay."

By the time the evening was coming to a close, two hours had passed. The cake had been cut and served. Logan and Melody had danced several more times. The bridal bouquet had been thrown. Everyone had seen the happy couple off. They were headed to their new home instead of a fancy hotel. They said the home felt like a fancy hotel anyway and they were very much looking

forward to being there as husband and wife. They'd been admonished to begin their time together there with prayers invoking God's blessings on their home and their union.

People were starting to clean up and go home. Logan and JoJo started loading the band's equipment into Logan's vehicle while Gabe, young Eric and Taylor broke down tables and put away chairs. Along with the workers hired to take care of everything and the caterers and other people helping, the work was finished quickly and by 10:00 PM the church was back to its original state and ready for the next morning.

Melody sat on a sofa in the foyer waiting for Logan. By the time he came to collect her, she was sound asleep. Jeffy checked on her again and instructed Jordan to stay with her which was fine with Jordan because she said she couldn't walk another step on her injured foot. Once the work was finished, young Eric simply scooped her up and carried her to the car. Gabe took Taylor's hand and walked her out to his car. Logan sat down beside Melody and touched her arm. "Hey Melody," he said softly.

She drew a sharp breath and opened her eyes. "Oh, sorry I fell asleep. I guess I'm really tired."

"More like you're still a little intoxicated," he said.

She smiled. "Maybe so, but at least I'm not asking you to take me to your bed anymore."

"Yeah, but you say that like it's a good thing," he quipped, making her laugh. He sighed. "Well, I guess it's time for me to take you home."

"I guess so, but take the long way. Make the drive last a good long while."

"Why?"

"Oh, um," she sighed. "I guess because I don't want this night to end."

He smiled. "That's good to hear because I feel the same way."

"Really? Why?"

"Because I've loved spending time with you."

"Not because you loved performing for everyone?"

"Well, I loved that too."

"Me too," she sighed. "You were so awesome. I could watch you sing all day and all night."

He swallowed hard. "I can tell you're still not sober."

She yawned. "Why?"

"Because you're saying things I know you wouldn't normally say."

"I'm not lying."

"I don't think you're lying. I just think you wouldn't normally tell me these things. You're usually more guarded than that."

"I am? Like, I'm a snob or something?"

"No, Melody, there's nothing snobby about you. But like, you're a little shy, or maybe keep your thoughts a little close to the vest."

She sighed.

He took her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Can you walk?" he asked as she swayed slightly.

"Of course I can," she said with a soft laugh.

He got her to the car with no problem. As he drove toward Huntington Beach he glanced over at her. She was about the cutest thing in the world. So feminine. So soft. So sweet. So kind. So smart. So pretty. So everything. And he had to agree—he didn't want this night to end. So he would have to procure another date to look forward to before he left her at her door.

✝✝✝

Gabe stood by the passenger door of his car. Taylor leaned up against it. He sighed. He was tired. He'd worked hard and partied hard all day, and on stage he'd expended a great deal of energy.

Taylor was looking at her phone. "You went viral again," she said without looking up.

He nodded. "Cool," he said flatly. "Are there lots of comments about Logan or JoJo's drumming? Or about Jeffy?"

She laughed. "Yes, to all of the above."

He nodded. "Good."

She looked up at him and noticed the tenseness in his jaw. She frowned. "Gabe, are you mad at me?"

His eyes opened in surprise. "Mad at you? Of course not."

He had a quick flashback to his mom asking his father the same thing, usually when his father was in business mode. His father would explain what he was thinking about, which helped his mom understand him better. It helped Gabe too. He wondered if he was taking on a bit of his father's persona, even though most people thought of them as opposites. His father was very serious and businesslike, while Gabe was happy-go-lucky.

"Why would you think I was mad at you?" Gabe asked.

She shrugged. "I wasn't sure why, that's why I asked. Maybe because I didn't realize the punch was spiked. I mean, how dumb is that?"

He smiled. "You're not dumb. Though sometimes a little oblivious."

She laughed. "Well, I was in party mode."

He nodded.

"And wow, Gabe, when you started singing on *Johnny B Goode*, I thought I was gonna jump out of my body. You were so awesome."

He chuckled. "Thanks. So, it's time."

"Time?"

"Yeah, time to tell me what's up with Melody and Jeffy."

"Oh, that." She sighed. "Well, Jeffy picked up on what happened to Melody last night."

"Oookaaaay, and so, what happened to Melody last night?"

Taylor went on to explain everything Melody told her, including how afraid Melody had been, how her hands had shaken, and how afraid she was for her father and of being alone. Yet she didn't want to tell Logan because she was afraid of where that might lead.

Gabe nodded. "So, Logan doesn't know anything about last night at all?"

"Right."

"But he saw the guy's car go by Melody's house early this morning?"

"Right."

"So, he knows she's being stalked."

Taylor shrugged. "I guess."

He frowned as he thought.

"So, now you're mad at me?"

"No. Just thinking. Taylor, are you still a little bit buzzed?"

"I don't know, why?"

"Because usually you wouldn't really care if I was mad. And if I was you'd tell me to get over it."

Tears welled in her eyes.

He shook his head. "Okay, Tay, it's okay," he said, knowing now it was definitely the alcohol making her emotional. "Hey, I have to make a phone call. You sit down in the car, okay?" He opened the door and she got in.

He bent over and kissed her. "Just give me a few minutes."

"Are you gonna tell Logan?"

"Not yet."

"Melody is gonna hate me."

"Don't be silly." He closed her door and stood at the back of the car and made his call.

"Gabe, everything okay?" Joey said.

"Not sure. I have some information and I'll let you make that decision. I don't feel good about something I just found out, and I'm concerned about Melody and Logan."

"Okay. Lay it on me."

Gabe explained everything he knew to Joey, Ameritech's second in command, who listened quietly.

Gabe finished with, "Look, I know I'm just a kid, and not even an official agent yet, but I feel like we need to make sure this guy doesn't jump Logan, or hurt Melody when she's out and about on her own."

Joey sighed. "You have good instincts, Tanner. And as far as I'm concerned you became an official agent the day you took out two guys and almost gave your life for my niece."

"Thank you, sir. So, what are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna get Melody's schedule and put a guy on her. And I have to talk to Logan. We can't let him be blindsided."

"So, I'm not being kind of over-protective?"

"No. Here's a statistic for ya, Gabe. More than one in four women in our country report rape or attempted rape in their lifetime, and most sexual violence is committed by someone the victim knows. So, as shameful as those statistics are, I don't think we can be too careful. I know you're young and it's a hard thing to come to grips with. Women have been raped since the beginning of time. The devil knows how to destroy. It's up to us good guys to protect women and to influence other men to protect women. And I don't think we're overreacting because a good many of those rapes are perpetrated by

young men on high school and college campuses. They are young men the age of this Cade person, who feels like that it's Melody's fault for arousing him and not following through—and that is *exactly* what happened to Melaynah."

"Should I call Logan then?" Gabe asked.

"I'll take care of that," Joey said. "Or I may speak to Mark and have him take care of it."

"Yes, sir. Then I guess I'll be getting Taylor home."

"You do that, and be careful and thanks for the heads up."

"Yes, sir."

✝✝✝

"Well, Melody, I've driven around as long as I can, but it's time to get you home," Logan said as he pulled into her driveway.

She smiled. "Logan, I had such a good time today. Thank you so much."

"Thank you for coming. I had a great time and you were the reason." He got out of the car and came around to open her door. "So, you'll see if you can come to Sunday dinner tomorrow night?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll see. Call me tomorrow after church and I'll let you know."

He helped her out and closed her door, and they headed up the walk toward the front door. "Are you feeling better? No more dizziness?"

"Nope, no dizziness. I think I'm good," she said softly as they got to the front door. She turned and leaned against the wall beside the door. "Again, Logan, thank you. And you were awesome singing and playing that guitar tonight."

He smiled and checked his watch to make sure enough time had passed since the little drinking episode.

She smiled too and looked up at him. "I still don't want this night to end."

"Me neither," he said quietly. His heart was pounding in his chest. He reached up to touch her face and moved close. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She giggled. "Why do you keep asking me that? I'm good. Really."

He sighed. "I'm asking you because I want to kiss you goodnight, but only if you're sober enough to say yes or no, and only if you want me to."

"I am. And—I do."

His heart sped up. Slowly he bent down toward her as she lifted her face to him. He touched his lips lightly to hers, brushing them gently back and forth across her lips, then pressed more firmly.

She sighed in the back of her throat and he took that as permission to extend the kiss. He moved even closer, took her face in both of his hands and kissed her thoroughly. He lifted his head and smiled down at her.

"That was nice," she said softly.

His smile widened.

"Do it again."

His eyebrows rose. Had he heard what he thought he'd heard? He looked into her eyes and she had an expectant look on her face. This time he pulled her against him, kissed her long and slow, and finally pulled away.

She was breathing hard. So was he. He stepped back. "You'd better go in."

She sighed, found her keys and turned to open her front door. She stepped inside and turned with a sweet smile. “Good night, Logan.”

“Good night, Melody.”

“Thanks again.”

“Thank you.”

“Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Can’t wait,” he said with a smile.

He stood there and watched her close the door. With a huge smile on his face, he turned and headed to his car. He pulled out his phone when it buzzed. “Hey Dad. Hold on a minute.” He got in the car and started it up. “Okay. Everything okay? Mom’s okay?”

“Mom’s okay. Where are you?”

“I just dropped Melody off at her house. Why?”

“Is she inside, door closed and locked?”

“Yes, why? You’re making me nervous.”

“Okay, well, I have a little story to tell you.”

✞✞✞

November 16th, 11:00 PM, Saturday Night

Morgan Home, Santa Ana, California

Alec Morgan lay in a soft bed in his new home, smiling at his young bride as she cuddled up close to him. “Did you have a good day?”

“Oh, Alec, it was the best day ever. Everything was so smooth, so calm, no stress like you hear about weddings. It was really perfect. Did you think so?”

“I did. Of course, it helps the stress when you know that someone else is taking care of all the details and paying for everything.”

She sighed. “The Kinos are the best people I’ve ever met. And I must’ve said thank you a hundred times today and Mrs. Kino brushed it away like it was nothing.”

“Mr. Kino did too, and Eric did too.”

“I really think they don’t want any thanks for it,” Desi said.

Alec nodded. “Mr. Kino told me to pay it forward.”

“Well, let’s really make sure we do that. I mean, like, what someone did for us, let’s do that for someone else one day.”

“You mean, find a homeless couple and get them off the streets and give them a wedding?”

“Yes. I mean, really. When we were in the shelter I met at least three other couples. I’m not sure of their circumstances, but I’m sure they needed help.”

“Let’s make it a goal, then, Des. I mean, ideally, I need to get through school and get a good-paying job, but I’m working now, and we can set aside a little something every paycheck to put toward our goal of helping someone off the streets. Even if it’s only twenty bucks.”

She giggled. “Just a month ago, twenty bucks to us would have been a fortune. Do you remember being so hungry or thirsty?”

“I actually hope I’ll never forget,” Alec said. He ran his fingers over her lovely face. “I’m actually grateful for the experience we’ve been through. I

love you, Desi."

"I love you."

"Promise me that if you start to feel differently, or like, sad or depressed or disappointed in me, or angry with me, or lonely or something like that, promise me that we'll talk about it and go to Grandmaster Kino or someone like him to get marriage counseling."

"I promise," Desi said softly.

"Good, because, I will never leave you. I will never cheat on you. I will never ask you for a divorce. And ya know what, there's something else I've been thinking about, something I want to do."

"What's that?"

"I want to get baptized and go to church and learn about Jesus and all of His teachings and I want to live by God's laws and, well, just do things right. Like the Kinos. I want to be the best man I can be, so that you and our son will be able to trust me and look to me to do the right things for our family."

Desi's eyes filled with tears. "Well, Alec," she said as she sniffed. "I didn't think I could be happier and now I am."

"I'm glad that makes you happy."

"I'm glad you feel free to tell me your innermost thoughts."

He was quiet a minute. "So, I guess your dad doing, like, a one-eighty, I guess that makes you happy too?"

"So so happy. And Charity is in heaven. She says he really is like a different person."

"I was thinking about your mom," Alec said. "I mean, your dad went way off in a different direction for years, and your mom, she stayed by his side, she didn't give up on him. And he finally came back and got his head on straight. She's an amazing lady."

"You're right, Alec, and the fact that you can see what she did tells me you're gonna be an amazing husband."

"Stay by me, Des. Don't give up on me."

"Never. I love you so much."

He pulled her close and kissed her. "Thank you, God," he prayed softly.

✞✞✞

November 17th, 5:00 AM, Sunday Morning

Mark Adams Home, Newport Beach, California

Mark Adams was the second child and first son of Shelley and Robert Adams. His mother and father divorced when he was only seven. His father had recently passed away. Mark was the middle child. The younger brother of Breanna Adams Kino, and the older brother of Joey Adams. He'd been eight years old when Eric Kino senior came into their lives and was pretty much raised by him, and of course, his mom.

Mark and his brother Joey were trained in the martial arts by both their stepfather, Eric senior, and by their stepbrother Ricky. Mark, like his son JoJo, had been a Heisman candidate quarterback. Out of high school, he was recruited by the biggest Division I schools but chose Hawaii to learn about and

be close to his step-grandparents.

Mark's eldest son, Joseph "JoJo" Adams, was the product of a strange one-night stand, that was offered to him on Mark's eighteenth birthday by a girl who was dying of brain cancer. JoJo's biological mother died shortly after his birth. JoJo, with his brown hair and big brown eyes, was raised the first four years of his life by his grandparents, Shelley and Eric Kino, while Mark was away at school.

Mark's chances of going pro were ended by a knee injury which didn't devastate him like some thought it would, because he'd grown weary of the game taking precedence over everything in his life. He decided he wanted to be more helpful to the world and took the path of getting his law degree. It took him longer because he came home from college, and worked his way through law school and took over the care of his young son. He wanted to take full responsibility for his life.

He met the love of his life when he was thirty and JoJo was twelve. That woman, Bella Landow at the time, was the victim of severe domestic violence. Mark intervened and they fell in love and were married. She brought her eleven-year-old son, Logan, a wonderful young man, with her into the marriage. Bella had beautiful black hair and big blue eyes. Logan had his mother's blue eyes, but his hair was light brown.

Mark, having been taken under the wing of Justin Lee, became a "crackshot" criminal defense attorney, but went further, studying and mastering every aspect of the law. He was made managing partner of Justin's law firm by the time he was thirty-six and now, at age forty, helps to run one of the nation's largest and most prestigious law firms. He does a lot of pro bono work, and like his stepfather, does his best to serve God through serving others. His goal is to champion and protect the innocent.

The Adams home in Newport was not a giant estate like his parents' home, or his sister's and brother-in-law's home, but it *was* very nice. A lovely sprawling mansion off of Jamboree Road, it had a large, green front yard, a six-car garage, three levels and a beautiful pool and backyard kitchen area. It was only a few miles from the ocean, and many mornings Mark, JoJo, and Logan took their run to the beach, trained there at sunrise, and ran home before most people's day had begun—a habit developed by Eric senior's training. They worked tirelessly every day to be the best they could be, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

On this particular Sunday morning after the Morgan wedding, Logan finally gave up trying to sleep and went to take a shower. It'd taken a long time for the rage to calm enough for him to even try to go to bed. JoJo had taken time to talk him down, though he probably wasn't the best person for the job because JoJo was also having to tamp down his own anger.

All Logan could see in his mind all night was an image of that jerk pushing Melody against a brick wall, squeezing her cheeks in his big hand, and forcing his mouth on hers. He couldn't get it out of his brain. It didn't help that he clearly remembered him grabbing her arm in her front yard the day Logan had

gone over to help her with yard work. Logan wanted to beat the guy to a pulp. And Melody had probably been afraid to tell him because of that. Was she protecting her ex, or him?

He dressed for church and made his way downstairs. The house was still quiet. Grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge, he drank it down and then went searching for food and decided to cook. He fried two eggs, and layered them between two thick pieces of cheese and smeared toast with mayo, placed the eggs and cheese between the two fat pieces of toasted bread, cut the sandwich in half and sat down at the breakfast bar. He'd eaten half the sandwich when his father came downstairs and entered the kitchen.

"You're up early," Mark Adams said.

Logan nodded.

"Having a hard time, son?"

Logan nodded.

Mark sighed and sat down next to him. "I know where your mind is going."

Logan blinked and nodded. "I thought she had dirt on her face, but it was a bruise."

Mark drew a breath. "And you're blending that in with seeing bruises on your mother's face."

"And arms, and back, and neck, and legs."

Mark sighed. "I get it, Logan, but son, you have to separate this. It's not the same. And we're gonna put a stop to it right now. It won't go any further."

Logan nodded. "No, it won't."

Mark put his hand on Logan's shoulder. "After you eat, let's go in my office and have a prayer together."

Logan nodded. "Thanks, Dad, I'd like that." He watched his father as he went about making himself some herbal tea. "How's Mom feeling?"

"She's doing well. Morning sickness hasn't been too bad."

"It should be over soon, right? I mean, doesn't it usually go away after about three months?"

"Yes, and that means she has almost another whole month to go."

"Oh." He looked up at the man who'd adopted him. His love and respect for Mark Adams knew no bounds. He'd come into Logan's and his mom's lives like the hero he was. Logan's mom had been terribly abused by Logan's biological father. But Logan's martial arts teacher, Master Mark, had come into their lives and rescued his mother. And he loved his mother and he loved Logan. He was such a good man. "So, did I wake you?"

"No. Joey did."

"Oh. Why is Uncle Joey calling you so early in the morning?"

"To give me a status report."

"On?"

He nodded. "On Melody's problem."

"I'm listening."

Mark added some honey to his tea and looked at Logan. "Okay, so Ameritech did some digging on Cade Kessler and put an agent on him shortly

after Joey and I spoke."

"And?"

"And, well, the agent saw him drive past Melody's house three more times after you left last night—the last time about two this morning."

"Where does he live?"

"Don't start, Logan."

"I have to do something."

Mark nodded. "You will. We would like you to give her a call and invite her entire family over here today for Sunday dinner. You understand, we have to tell her family what's happening?"

Logan thought and nodded.

"We have an agent watching over the Keith family today until they arrive here, assuming they agree to come. I want to speak with her parents separately and fill them in on the situation. And I'm sure you have things you want to ask Melody and say to Melody. We'll also speak with her brothers. We will not let this go any further."

"Okay, I'll give her a call in a few hours. But Dad, I'm telling you now, I cannot let this go. He hurt her."

"Vengeance is mine saith the Lord," Mark loosely quoted.

Logan sighed. "Yes, sir. But he'd better stay away from her, Dad, because if he comes near her, I won't think twice about killing another man."

"Logan, that is not who you are."

"Isn't it? What I did, what I had to do, to save my mother, it's inside me. It stays with me."

"It sounds to me like you need further counseling, Logan."

"I don't feel like ending my own life anymore."

"But you still think of yourself as a killer?"

Logan sighed and thought. "No. I really don't. I sing and play beautiful music. I write words to songs about love and lofty celestial ideas. I think of myself as gentle and filled with God's light."

Mark nodded. "Good. Hold that thought. Hold it. Just because you will rise up and become a warrior when necessary doesn't make you a killer. You're a good guy, Logan. You're becoming a good man. Stay that way. I'm sure that's how Melody sees you. Don't disappoint her."

"Yes, sir. I want to be a good man in her eyes. And in God's eyes. So, that's what I'll do." He sighed and offered his father a sheepish grin. "Thanks, Dad, for like, talking me down off the cliff—again."

Mark smiled. That wasn't just a metaphor, because Mark had talked Logan off a cliff for real back when he was eleven. "This time around it wasn't very hard, because I know you were just venting."

Logan gave a soft laugh.

"So," Mark began. "How serious is it between you and Melody?"

Logan sighed. "Getting more and more serious by the day."

"But you've only been on one date."

"Yeah, but I've had my eye on her for a while. And the way she kissed me

last night, I think she feels the same way."

Mark smiled. "Good for you."

✝✝✝

Ephesians 6:11

"Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Melody gazed up at the large home as her father turned into the drive and parked in front of one of three double garage doors. The house was a beige-colored brick. The front-door area was more like a patio than a porch. It had a giant archway over the top and a large bench with colorful cushions surrounded by two giant planters filled with flowers.

"Wow," Phil said as he and his brother Lyle got out of the car.

"It's some place, isn't it?" David Keith remarked.

"It's really pretty," Carol said softly.

Melody didn't say anything. She didn't know what to say. What to think. She knew Mr. Adams was a big-time attorney guy who was second in command at a large law firm. She hadn't really given much thought to how wealthy they were because Logan was so down-to-earth and didn't seem to think much about it either. She didn't care about money or wealth, and she had the feeling that Logan didn't either, and that was one of the things that made her really like him. He wasn't caught up in material things. However, it was plain to see that his home, his way of life, was way more affluent than she'd originally thought.

Before they could get up to the front door and ring the bell, Logan came out of the house with a big smile.

"Hey, Keith family!" he said brightly. "We're so glad you could come."

"It's our pleasure," David Keith replied. "I'm sure my sweet Carol is happy to not have to cook dinner for a change."

Carol smiled and nodded.

Logan shook Mr. Keith's hand and then Mrs. Keith, and then the boys and finally, gently took Melody's hand. He didn't let it go. "Come on in, my family is looking forward to seeing you all again."

He led them inside through double front doors that matched the arch and were at least eight feet high. Melody couldn't help drawing a quick breath, because the interior was spectacular. The entrance foyer was large and white with marble floors. To her right was a huge piece of furniture—she wasn't sure what it was called. A secretary? A dresser? A console table, maybe? It was large, and obviously an antique and above it was one of the most beautiful paintings of the beach and the ocean she'd ever seen. It was more like a photograph, the detail was so great. She stood staring at it for a minute.

Logan smiled. "You like the painting?"

"It's totally amazing."

"My Aunt Breez is an artist. She loves nature."

"She's good," Melody said quietly. "I think some of her paintings are in your grandparents' home."

"They are."

She looked to her left to see another large archway and underneath, a giant curved staircase that disappeared as it turned toward the upstairs.

Before Logan could bring the family into the main living area, his mother and father appeared in the foyer.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Keith," Mark said as he extended his hand.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Adams," David Keith greeted.

"Please call me Mark."

"Thanks, Mark, I will, and please call me David and my wife, Carol."

Mark nodded. "And my wife, Bella."

Bella smiled and extended her hand. "Welcome to our home."

"Thank you," Carol said. "It's absolutely lovely."

"Thank you. Come in, come in." She smiled at the boys. "I bet you guys are hungry. Well, you'll be happy to know that there are lots of appetizers if you're anything like Logan and JoJo."

Phillip and Lyle smiled. They were all led back to the rear of the home, past the marble entryway floors to hardwood floors, past a large living room area on the left, with two huge sofas and a baby grand piano, and finally to a huge open kitchen, dining, and den area. It was obvious that this was where the living mostly took place.

Joey Adams and his wife Breez rose as the group approached.

"You remember my brother, Joey Adams," Mark said.

Joey shook everyone's hand.

"Of course we remember the Kino Challenge champion," Phil said, a little in awe.

Joey smiled. "Not anymore."

Everyone stated their names and finally Joey added, "And this is my wife Breez."

"It's Aunt Breez we were talking about who did the painting you were admiring in the foyer," Logan put in quickly.

"Yes, Mrs. Adams," Melody said. "That painting is amazing."

Breez giggled. "Oh, that old thing?"

"She's teasing," Bella said. "She loves that painting and so do we."

"Okay, let me see if I can get everyone's name," Breez said. "You are Carol, and David, and Phil and Lyle," she said as she pointed at each one. "And of course I know Melody. I don't know how we could get by without her. She's a gem."

"Thank you, Mrs. Adams," Melody said, her face a little pink. She turned to the little ones who were being very polite as they stood beside their mother.

Melody knelt down. "Hey Sophia, how are you doing today?"

"Hi Melody. I'm good. I'm glad you're here."

"Me too," Melody said, offering a quick smile at Logan. She then poked her finger at Kelstyn's tummy. "Where's my hug?"

Kelstyn grinned and threw her arms around Melody. And not to be outdone, her cousin Emily did the same.

Melody then took Ledger's fat little hand and gave it a kiss.

"Well, come in and make yourselves comfortable," Bella said. "Help yourselves to all the appetizers you want. Dinner is almost ready."

"So, where's JoJo?" Phil asked.

Logan smiled. "He'll be here soon. He got called into a football meeting."

Logan grabbed a small plate and selected some pigs in blankets, toothpicks threaded with lunchmeat, cheese, and pickles, a miniature quiche, and some tortilla chips with a large blob of guacamole. He handed it to Melody and then got another plate for himself and doubled the serving. Melody giggled. "I don't know how you eat so much."

He laughed. "I expend a lot of energy." He looked around at the other guests. "Please, guys, don't be shy. Have at it."

Phil and Lyle immediately grabbed plates and started loading them down.

Carol sat and spoke with Breez about the painting.

David Keith nodded at Mark. "It was really very kind of you to invite our whole family to dinner."

Mark smiled. "The pleasure is ours for sure. We're happy to get to know the family of such a wonderful young lady as your daughter."

"Thank you," David said. "And you must be very proud of your sons. A Heisman candidate and a young man whose musical skills are taking the world by storm."

"Well, let's not jump the gun. So far he's a social media phenom. Let's see what happens when his first album comes out."

"So, has he actually signed a record deal?"

Mark nodded. "He's signed with Nash Records. He had other offers, but we trust Nash because Toby Nash is a friend of the family. But we'll just have to wait and see if his social media status translates into people actually paying to hear him sing."

"Is he already working on the album?"

"He's working on writing the music for the album. He'll hit the recording studio after Christmas."

"So, he'll have to go to Nashville?"

"No. There are several recording studios he can use and one of them is here in LA."

While the men chatted, Carol and Breez headed into the kitchen.

"Please let me help," Carol said.

"Sure," Bella agreed. "I'm almost done, but you can grab plates and set them on the island. Breez, you can do the silverware. I'm just setting everything out buffet style and they can all serve themselves."

"Perfect," Carol agreed and started to work.

Five minutes later JoJo came in through the kitchen door.

"Hey JoJo," Bella said sweetly.

"Hey Mom."

"How'd the meeting go?"

He sighed. "Okay, I guess. Is dinner almost ready? It smells really good."

"Almost ready. Go greet our guests."

"Yes, ma'am." He glanced up at Melody's mom. "Hello, Mrs. Keith. Nice to see you."

"You too, JoJo, and Phil and Lyle are patiently waiting to see you."

He nodded, quickly kissed his Aunt Breez on the cheek and headed over into the den area. Phil and Lyle were on the far end having a conversation with Logan and Melody, so he stopped by the adults first.

"Hey Uncle Joey, Dad."

"JoJo," they replied.

JoJo held his hand out to David. "Mr. Keith, nice to see you."

David smiled. "Very nice to see you too, JoJo. Melody said you killed it on the drums yesterday."

JoJo chuckled. "I fake it, but I have lots of fun, and the drums always impress the girls."

The men smiled.

Lyle and Phil came over to shake hands with JoJo. It was obvious they wanted to talk football. JoJo indulged them. They talked about the final game of the regular season coming up against number-six UCLA. It was the most important game of the season. Both USC and UCLA had one loss. If USC won, they would finish the season with only one loss and have a chance of making the playoffs. Right now USC is ranked number five and would definitely make the playoffs if fourth-ranked Ohio State lost. That was really their only real hope. Right now, Georgia is ranked number one and playing unranked Georgia Tech. No hope there that Georgia would lose against Tech. Texas is number two and playing Texas Tech and they're not gonna lose. Alabama is number three and playing Vandy. They're definitely not losing. Ohio State is playing Wisconsin and JoJo is really hoping they mess up. But USC has to win, and it's not gonna be a walk in the park. Especially since one of the main things they just learned in the meeting is their big-time, highly draftable senior tight end is out with a torn hamstring.

Meanwhile, Logan was really wanting to get Melody alone, but she was engaging the children in a story. Apparently, it was the first half of the story she told last Saturday, the part he hadn't heard. He watched her talk, watched the light in her eyes and had to smile. He was really becoming attached to this girl. He looked closely at her face as she spoke, trying to see the bruise Taylor told Gabe about, but it wasn't currently visible. The thought of the guy's hands on her, squeezing her cheeks, causing her pain, it made him crazy and the rage took him over quickly. He suddenly rose. "I'll be right back," he said as he stepped out the back door.

Logan went to lean his hands on the outdoor dining table and breathed deeply, trying to get control of his anger. He was a mellow kind of person. He was. He did not strike out in anger. He did not. He realized he was trying to convince himself. He was not like his father. His biological father. He couldn't

be like his father. Of course, he knew for sure he wouldn't get angry and strike a woman. Or kick her. Or throw a glass at her. Or strangle her. Or drown her. Or rape her. He slammed his hands down on the table. Logan wouldn't do any of those things, but he'd killed the man who did. And now he needed to get his anger under control.

Mark came outside to get him for dinner. "Son?"

Logan turned to him. "Dad, tell me that I wasn't wrong when I pulled that trigger. Tell me, please." He looked up, tears in his eyes.

Mark went to him immediately. "Logan, you weren't wrong. You were so very right. Because the alternative is, your mother would be dead. You saved your mother's life. If you hadn't pulled that trigger, she'd be gone. Which means there would be no such person as Emily, the little sister you love and adore. And who knows what would have happened to you or to JoJo and me without you and your mom. You were a strong warrior, Logan. And I thought you knew that."

Logan nodded. "I thought so too. But this rage is making me crazy. I feel out of control. Like my bio dad."

"Well not like him, but of course you feel angry. Some guy has hurt someone you care for. I would feel the same way. I *did* feel the same way when that crazy male Karen yelled at your mom in the grocery store and scared her and made her cry. Remember that?"

Logan nodded and smiled. "JoJo and I had to tackle you to hold you back."

"Right. Do you think I was wrong to want to tear his head off?"

Logan shook his head. "No. You were awesome."

"Well, that's how you are. You're not like Gordon. You're like me. And I couldn't be prouder of you."

Logan drew a deep breath, blew it out and nodded. "Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome. Now come on, they're waiting for us."

✝✝✝

Dinner was delicious. Bella prepared roast beef, mashed potatoes with gravy, broccoli, chicken alfredo, corn medley, salad, and yeast rolls. The conversation was entertaining. They learned that David Keith was a middle school science teacher and Carol Keith worked from home as a medical transcriptionist. They were regaled with stories of middle-schoolers gone crazy, which led to stories about Lyle and Phil, and then stories of JoJo and Logan and their high school antics. As dinner came to an end, Mark and Joey mentally prepared to speak to the Keiths about what was happening with Cade, while Logan prepared to tell Melody that they knew what had happened and why it was so dangerous.

"That was so good," Melody said. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Adams, for the delicious dinner."

"You are so welcome! Ready for some dessert?"

Melody laughed. "I couldn't eat another thing right now."

"Well maybe a little bit later."

"Melody," Logan said softly. "Will you come for a walk with me? I'll show

you around the backyard."

She smiled at him. "Sure."

"I wanna come," Emily said.

Logan went to her and touched her nose. "Let me talk to Melody alone right now and maybe we can have a trampoline session before dessert?"

"I want dessert now," she demanded.

"Well, I'd be happy to give you some," Bella answered. "If only you'd eat some of your broccoli and three more bites of your mashed potatoes."

Emily frowned. "But I want some dessert."

Mark raised his eyebrows at his daughter. "Number one, you don't argue with your mother. You do what she says. And number two, if you're not careful, you won't get any dessert."

"Uh, oh, Em, I'd eat up if I were you. And really, you should tell Mom you're sorry that you argued with her," JoJo said.

"I didn't argue."

"And now you're arguing with me," JoJo laughed.

Em frowned and looked at her mom. "I sorry I argued."

Logan rose, gathered his plate and utensils, went to Melody and stacked hers on top and took them to the kitchen sink. Melody rose and Logan came back, took her hand and led her out the white folding French doors with a crisp black trim.

She smiled up at the sun and then looked around. "It's nice out here."

He looked around, trying to see it with her eyes. The entire backyard was enclosed with a ten-foot-high privacy fence. They were standing on a stamped white patio under a large white solid roof. There was a beautiful built-in grill, two gas burners, a large counter top, and a refrigerator. Also under the patio roof was a large outdoor dining table and chairs with bright cushions of teal and yellow.

The concrete of the patio extended out past the roof line and all the way to a fenced-in pool area. The fence was a low, black wrought iron gate obviously meant to keep a little three-year-old out of the pool area. Past the pool to the right of a green grassy yard was a seating area with nice wooden lounge chairs with bright cushions surrounding a fire pit and along the privacy fence on that side was a pretty water feature splashing over rocks.

To the left along the edges of the grass were a few small trees, one a palo verde tree, and the other a California redbud, each with a bench sitting under it. In the middle of the green grass was a large trampoline.

Logan turned left and headed toward the side of the yard. He drew a deep breath. "Melody, I need to talk to you about something."

She frowned. "Oh."

He smiled and stopped walking. "But before I do, I need to do this."

Moving close to her, he lifted her face and kissed her. He meant it only to be a quick kiss, but she did that sigh thing and he lingered. When he finally pulled away, she sighed again.

"Thank goodness," she said.

"Why 'thank goodness'?" he asked.

"Because I thought you were gonna talk to me about last night's kiss being a mistake and that's not what you wanted our relationship to be."

He smiled and shook his head. "I'm glad you're calling it a relationship and not just some guy you went on a date with."

"Well, it feels like a relationship."

"Good." He nodded toward the tree in the back corner of the yard. "Let's go sit over there."

They sat down on a bench under the tree. He turned toward her so he could see her face and drew a deep breath. "Melody, I—I know what happened to you Friday night at the football game."

She frowned and her hand immediately moved up to touch her bruised cheek, though currently he couldn't see the bruise. "Taylor told you?"

"Well, sort of. Don't be mad at her. She told Gabe. She's really upset that Gabe insisted she tell him, and she thinks you're gonna hate her and never trust her again."

Melody sighed. "That's silly." She looked up at Logan with big eyes. "So, how did Gabe know there was something to tell?"

"He saw Jeffy react when she checked you out last night. He asked Taylor if she knew why Jeffy would have that reaction and Taylor, being a little tipsy, couldn't think fast enough to get out of it. So, she said she knew but she couldn't tell him. But later, after the wedding, he told her she had to tell him and she knew it was for your own good and she told him, and it's a good thing she did."

"Why? It's no big deal."

"Is that what you think, Melody?" He took her hands. "Your safety and the safety of those around you is extremely important. Besides the safety of your own family, you are around my family, my grandmother and my little uncles and aunt. And if you're in danger then they're in danger."

She frowned. "What did Gabe tell you?"

"Gabe didn't tell me anything. He felt it important enough to call Uncle Joey and Uncle Joey agreed. He was told that this Cade dude put a bruise on your cheek by squeezing your face to hold you still while he kissed you."

Melody sniffed as the tears began to gather in her eyes.

Logan squeezed her hands. "And Uncle Joey was told that Cade grabbed you and drug you out of the concession line and forced you over behind a building and wouldn't let you leave. He grabbed your face hard enough to bruise your cheek and forced you to kiss him. He was told the guy threatened to knock your father out if he tried to interfere. And he was told that Cade refused to take no for an answer about you going out with him or having sex with him. Uncle Joey was also told that I saw Cade drive by when I came to get you for the wedding."

"You make it sound so bad. It wasn't that bad. I can handle him."

"Melody, he put his hands on you and you couldn't stop him. How do you think you can handle him?"

"I threatened to scream and he let me go," she said, her voice shaking as she thought of the fear she'd felt.

Logan sighed. "He let you go because you threatened to scream in a crowded area. What if the next time he sees you there isn't anyone around?"

"Well, then, I'll make sure I'm not alone."

"No. *I'll* make sure you're not alone. Melody, will you tell me why you tried to hide this from me?"

She wiped at a tear and sighed. "I was afraid for you."

"You don't think I can handle myself?"

"It's not that. I just don't want you to get into trouble for beating up Cade."

He sighed. "So, you'll put yourself in danger trying to protect me?"

"I really didn't think I was in danger. I don't think that Cade is gonna do anything. He's too much a coward. He's all hot air."

Logan shook his head. "He's a coward, that much is true. He's a coward who doesn't think it's bad for him to beat up on or force a girl. Melody, he's stalking you. He drove past your house several times last night."

"How do you know that?"

"Uncle Joey was concerned after Gabe called him, so he immediately sent a surveillance team to locate Cade and keep watch on him. They followed him and saw him drive past your house several times. The last time was around two this morning. Uncle Joey has also contacted Ameritech's law-enforcement liaison to find out what other legal measures they can take. Sweetheart, it seems to me like Cade has lost it, and that makes him dangerous. Who knows what he's planning. He could grab you off the street. He could break into your house and hurt you or your parents or your brothers."

A tear fell over her cheek. "Then what am I gonna do?"

He pulled her close and hugged her against his chest. "Okay, don't cry. And don't worry. We've got this. You aren't gonna do anything. Uncle Joey is taking measures to protect you and your family."

"How?"

"Well, he already has an agent watching your house. The agent tailed your family to church this morning and stayed with you until you arrived here."

"Wow, I had no idea." She frowned. "But, those agents, aren't they like, really expensive?"

"The cost isn't important and we'll handle that. We take care of our own."

"Your own?"

"Yes. Because you and your family matter to us now. You're under our protection—not because you work for my grandparents or because you're dating me, but because you're part of our lives. When someone we care about is in danger, we take care of our own."

"But what if I stop working for your grandparents, or what if you and I don't work out?"

He shook his head. "Well now, that's a very negative thought. Just so you know, there is no pressure about you and me. If you decide you're not interested in me, fine. Though it would be a hard thing for me. And if you stop

working for my grandparents, fine. Either way, we will still consider you family. Usually, the people God places in front of us, they become part of our lives forever."

"Kinda like what your Uncle Ricky told Desi and Alec."

"Exactly."

She smiled and wiped away the last of her tears. "Being part of your life forever sounds really nice."

He smiled. "It does. It will be really nice if that's where we're headed."

She giggled. "I guess we're getting way ahead of ourselves."

He nodded. "Maybe. So, let's go in and see what Uncle Joey has planned for you. Right now, he's talking to your family about everything and waiting for us to come back in so he can let us know the best way to protect you."

She sighed. "I hope my dad is not too upset."

"I'm sure he's not happy about this," he said as he stood and pulled her up.

They walked inside to find everyone in the large den. Mark was leaning against the mantel over the fireplace. JoJo was sitting in a chair in the corner. Melody's parents and brothers were sitting on one sofa and Joey was standing as he spoke. Bella sat on another sofa and apparently Breez had taken the young children to the playroom downstairs. Everyone looked up as Logan and Melody came inside and took a seat.

Looking at her family, seeing the worry in their eyes, made the tears start again. Logan went into the kitchen and grabbed a paper towel and brought it to her. She wiped at her face, and when she did, the bruise was plain to see. Logan sat next to her and sighed as the bruise became clear. He reached up and touched her cheek.

"And you really think Cade is capable of this kind of violence?" Carol Keith asked.

Joey nodded. "He's exhibiting a dangerous pattern and our surveillance shows that his obsession is escalating and that he's completely capable of what we just talked about."

"What did you just talk about?" Melody asked.

Joey sighed. "He is capable of some very bad things that could include raping or beating you, kidnapping you, or even hurting your family members or worse."

"What surveillance?" David Keith asked.

Joey pulled out his phone. "Shoot me the video log on Cade Kessler from the past eighteen hours." He ended the call, waited a moment, and opened the file that arrived. "Hand me the remote," he said to JoJo. He turned on the TV and mirrored what was on his phone. "Last night, Gabe called me a little before 10:00 PM. I immediately sent a team to locate Cade and another to watch your home. This first video was recorded from an agent's vehicle shortly after eleven. Melody wasn't home yet, but you can plainly see Cade's yellow Mustang drive slowly past the house."

They watched the screen. Melody shuddered and Logan took her hand.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, it's just so creepy to see him do this."

Joey nodded and advanced the video. "Now, here he is again just after midnight. Melody was home this time. As a matter of fact he just missed Logan dropping her off by about fifteen minutes. And then here he is again, around two this morning."

Joey continued through the Sunday recording. "An agent remained near your home throughout the day. So, here is Cade at ten this morning."

"We weren't there. We left for church at 9:30," Carol supplied.

Joey nodded. "Yes." He backed up the video. "Here you are pulling out of your driveway." He fast forwarded. "And here is Cade driving by thirty minutes later, then again at noon, one-thirty, and three—about the time you left to come here."

Joey brought up another set of recordings. "These final videos came from the security system already operating at this house. Once we identified Cade's vehicle and license plate, Ameritech flagged it in our system. He drove past here today while you were here at four, four-thirty, and again just before six."

He paused the last image as the Mustang passed slowly with its window down. "His behavior is consistent with intimate-partner stalking. He has escalated from unwanted contact to physical restraint, forced kissing, threats, and his repeated surveillance of two homes. The more obsessive a stalker gets, the more dangerous they can become. Some begin to think, 'If I can't have her, then nobody can.' That kind of desperation can lead to assault, rape, or murder. No one can predict precisely what he will do, but the escalation means we have to treat him as dangerous."

Logan rose, ran his hand over his thick brown hair. "Uncle Joey, I think this is my fault. I think I brought this on."

"How so?"

"Last Wednesday, when I came over to help Melody do yard work, Cade was there. His car was parked at the curb in front of the house and he was in the front yard and he had hold of Melody's arm. I heard her tell him to let go of her. She tried to pull her arm away, but he had a hard grip on her. I walked up and removed his hand from her. He wanted to know who I was, and I lied and told him I was her boyfriend. I thought it would discourage him from coming around. Apparently, it was news he was unable to handle."

Joey sighed and nodded. "Okay, well, this isn't your fault. Your only choices that day were to remove his hand from her or allow him to have his way with her. You made the only right choice. And your lie was very close to the truth, at least from what I can see." He raised his eyebrows with a smile.

Melody smiled and looked down.

"And that one statement should not send someone over the edge unless he was already off balance," Mark added.

"Okay," David Keith said abruptly. "So, what can we do to protect Melody and the rest of my family? Can you arrest him?"

Joey shook his head. "Well, that decision belongs to law enforcement of course. But Cade has crossed several lines. Melody can report physical

restraint, forced kiss, threats, and repeated drive-bys. And of course, Ameritech will provide our videos and witness statements and Mark can help you obtain a protective order." He looked at Melody. "The decision to make a report is yours, but I strongly recommend it."

Melody nodded slowly.

Joey looked at David. "Ameritech can install exterior cameras covering your doors, driveway, backyard, and fence line tonight. We'll also keep an agent with Melody and I think we'll assign one to Logan."

"Me? Uncle Joey, you don't think I can take care of myself?" Logan asked.

"If he tried to pick a fight with you, absolutely," Joey answered. "But Cade could bring a weapon, friends, or try to ambush you. You're twenty, so you aren't old enough for a California CCW. This isn't about whether you can win a fight. An agent gives you backup and another witness."

David looked troubled. "Okay, so, you put an agent on Melody. For how long? I mean, how long is she supposed to live like this?"

"Until law enforcement or a protective order can stop him, or until we're confident the threat has ended. We document everything, pursue every legal option, and keep your family safe in the meantime," Joey said.

"Well, I'd like to speak with you personally about this," David said.

Joey nodded.

"The rest of you come on in the kitchen," Bella invited. "We have several different desserts to choose from."

Joey escorted David back into Mark's office. The man turned nervously, his mouth in a grim line.

David sighed. "Mr. Adams," he began.

"Joey. Please, call me Joey."

He nodded. "I'm not quite sure how to say this, but, hiring an Ameritech agent to protect my daughter, it's quite expensive isn't it?"

"It is. And most people can't afford us. But Melody, and her family," he said pointedly, "are part of us, and we protect our own. In other words, there is no charge. And if there is a charge, it will be paid for by Mark, or by my stepfather."

"Your stepfather?"

"Eric Kino. Since he and my mother are the ones who hired Melody, they will claim her as their responsibility. And they will want to keep her safe not only because they care about her, as we all do, but because she will be with their children, and if she's in danger then they're in danger. Please, David, don't worry about the cost. It's taken care of."

"Well, I can't thank you enough."

"There is no thanks necessary. We've been so blessed, and now, we are able to use what we have to bless you and your family."

"Well, it's a little humiliating."

"Please don't feel that way. You and your wife are a hard-working couple who take good care of your family and teach your children well. If God can bless you through us, let Him. We are not all the same. Like in the parable,

some have been given five talents, others two, and others just one. How many talents we have doesn't matter. It's what we do with the one we have. I met a homeless man once. He was hungry and I got him a pizza. Instead of eating some and saving some for later, he ate a piece and gave the rest away to other homeless people. Do I think I was better than him because I had more than him? No. Just the opposite. I hope I can be as good as that man."

David nodded thoughtfully. "And I, too, will try to be as good as that man. But I have to say, your family has blessed a lot of people, and I'm grateful."

Joey nodded with a smile. "Understood."

✝✝✝

November 18th, 10:00 AM, Monday Morning

UCLA, Los Angeles, California

Agent Wyatt walked Jordan into her English class and set her backpack next to her desk. He smiled and saluted. "Have a good time."

"Oh yeah, right. A good time. Wish me luck."

"You don't need luck. You got this. I'll see you at 11:50."

She sighed. "Wait. Suddenly I can't remember, did Three say we're meeting for lunch at 1:00?"

Agent Wyatt frowned. "Jordan, he said 12:30. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Too much cramming for these finals. We're eating at, um..." She blew out a breath.

"You're meeting him at *Two Sisters Diner*. And you're worrying me."

"Don't be silly. I'm just tired and have too much information running around in my brain. I can't wait for this week to be over."

"Okay, Miss Brooks. Deep breath. You got this. See ya in a few hours."

Jordan nodded and took a deep breath.

Wyatt left the room and stood outside the door.

Two hours later, Agent Wyatt walked slowly beside Jordan as she hobbled along on her crutches, headed to the car. He stopped and smiled at a fellow agent. "Brown," he said casually. "I see you've got a cush job."

Agent Brown grinned and slapped Logan on the back. "Right?"

Logan smiled. "I'm gonna take that as a compliment."

"And I'm gonna take it as an insult," Jordan said, making the men chuckle.

Logan moved forward and hugged Jordan. "How ya doin' sis?"

She smiled. "I think I just passed my English exam, so there's that. It's the upcoming calculus exam that I'm having a breakdown over."

"I heard Jeffy's been tutoring you. Is that not helping?"

"I think it is. She's very intuitive about what I'm not understanding."

Logan chuckled. "Ya think?"

"So, I'm meeting Three for lunch. Wanna join us?"

"I'm thinkin' Three's a crowd."

Jordan giggled at the play on words. "He would love to see you. He says he doesn't get to see his brothers nearly as much as he used to and he wants to do something about that, so this would be a nice surprise."

"Well, if you put it that way, I guess I'll tag along."

They walked together and were almost to the parking lot when another guy stopped to greet Jordan.

"Miss Jordan Brooks, how nice to get to see you today," Mason Cole said loudly as he approached.

Jordan sighed heavily. "Hello, Mason."

Mason looked at the other three guys standing there. "Uh, I've met you before, in the coffee shop, but you're not the invisible boyfriend, right?"

Logan didn't smile. "No, I'm the brother of the very real boyfriend," he said firmly. "Name's Logan Adams."

Mason extended his hand. "Oh yeah, that's right, Logan. Sorry, I'm bad with names."

"That's not a good thing to admit," Logan said with a smile.

"Why not?" Mason asked. "Some people are just bad with names."

Logan nodded. "Because sometimes people who never bother to remember someone's name do it because they subconsciously don't think anyone else is important enough. It's a little bit narcissistic."

Mason frowned.

"But don't worry," Logan added. "I'm sure that isn't always the reason."

Mason nodded smugly. "Well, then, I'll definitely remember your name from now on." He smiled at Jordan. "So, once again, I see your hired help is here but no boyfriend."

"Mason, I'm gonna stop speaking to you if you continue to push this narrative that my boyfriend doesn't care about me. He has other things to do. He can't follow me around wherever I go."

"Like I said before, if I had a girlfriend as beautiful and amazing as you, I'd never let her out of my sight."

"Well, that isn't a fact that would entice a girl, Mason. Surely you understand that."

"That I would love her, be with her always, feed her, buy her things and take care of her every need?"

"Like a dog on a leash?" Logan qualified.

The two agents tried hard not to laugh.

Mason sneered at Logan then turned back to Jordan. "Just as an example, what is your boyfriend doing this morning that he couldn't be here with you on this important day where you're probably stressed out over exams?"

Jordan shook her head. "There's a whole lot of students here today, and almost none of them have someone around to hold their hand. Why would you think that I need someone to hold mine?"

"Answer my question. What's he doing?"

"He had a meeting with his producers, not that it's any of your business."

"Oh, that's right, he's like some kind of wannabe movie star."

"You know what, Mason, when I first met you I thought you were kind of funny, kind of sweet that you saw me and wanted to get to know me. Then you started in with this plot to try to undermine my boyfriend and I thought you were just silly. Then you kept it up and I thought you were not being very

honorable. Then you met him, and I thought you'd get the picture, that there was no way I was gonna ditch my boyfriend for you. And then the last time I saw you, I was getting a little pissed, but now, now that you're showing your true colors, I'm thinking you're nothing more than a pesky fly, not even worth me wasting energy on being mad."

Mason stepped closer to Jordan and was abruptly met with a strong hand against his chest. "Step back," was the order issued by Agent Wyatt.

Mason did as ordered.

Jordan went on. "And Mason, I have a fly swatter, so to speak, who is waiting on me to come have lunch with him. You're welcome to join us, but you won't fare well against that fly swatter."

"You're crazy," Mason mumbled.

"I'm thinking you're the one that's a little deranged. I don't want your attention. I don't care what you think about me or my boyfriend. I think you're irrational and unbalanced and I truly don't want you to speak to me again."

"And that's the end of that," Agent Wyatt said. He ushered Jordan forward to the parking lot.

Mason stood there watching, his face burning with humiliation.

✞✞✞

November 18th, 4:30 PM, Monday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Logan put his car in park in the front drive and headed up the front steps and into the house. He went straight to the kitchen where he heard voices.

Shelley looked up from where she sat at the table with the children. "Hey Logan!"

He smiled. "Hey Grandma!" He kissed her cheek and then looked around the kids at the kitchen table. "And how are you little munchkins doing today?"

As usual, Angelina spoke first. "We are making art, um, art, um what was it called, Mommy?"

"Art journals."

"Oh, art journals," Logan said as he looked around, not seeing the person he wanted to see.

"Yeah, ya have to make a picture of something ya did today," Noah said.

"I see." He looked at Noah's picture. "And you ate a cookie today?"

"Yeah, and Mommy says we can have another one after dinner."

Logan nodded and looked at the other pictures. "Let me see, Nate, you read a book today. And Manny, you also ate a cookie today. And Abe, you brushed your teeth today. And Angel face, you went for a walk in the sunshine and held Mommy's hand?"

She smiled. "Yes."

"Well you guys, these pictures are amazing. What a great day!"

Shelley smiled up at Logan. "She's in the laundry room."

He nodded. "Thanks, Grandma." He headed straight down the hall to the laundry room. He stood in the doorway, leaned against the frame and watched her. She had earbuds in her ears and she was dancing and bouncing and

swinging her hips as she folded little shirts and pants. Her head bobbed and she sang a line to the song she was listening to, Logan thought maybe slightly out of tune. She seemed happy. She seemed to be enjoying herself. She raised one hand in the air and pointed at the ceiling as she nodded her head and he wondered what song she was listening to. Whatever it was, it had her going. He watched her a few moments more. She nodded her head as she made a stack of pants and set them neatly in a basket, picked up a stack of shirts and spun around. She stopped mid-spin, her eyes wide.

"Oh! You scared me."

He grinned. "Sorry. I was enjoying the show."

She blushed. "I just bet you were."

"What are you listening to?"

She turned off the earbuds and a Toby Mac song, "The Goodness," blasted from her phone.

Logan nodded. "Awesome." He came forward. "So, it looks like you're having a good day. Are you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why?"

He nodded.

She shrugged with a smile. "I have my reasons. What about you? Are you having a good day?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Why?"

He chuckled. "I'll be more straightforward than you. I'm having a good day because Saturday night, I kissed a girl. And then Sunday, I did it again."

She smiled and sighed. "Me too."

"You kissed a girl?"

"Ha ha, very funny."

He smiled and moved closer. "And now, Melody, I'm about to do it again. If that's okay with you."

She looked behind him to make sure no one was around and nodded with a smile.

He took her in his arms and kissed her until she swayed. He finally pulled himself away. "Wow, it was just as good as I remembered it." He lowered his head and did it again. Then pulled away and smiled.

"You're very good at that," she said softly.

He gave a soft laugh. "That's good to know."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Because I always want to please you."

"Well then, so far, so good."

He grinned.

"So, you had a good day, which means you think you did pretty good on your exams today?" Melody asked.

"I did pretty good, I think."

"Do you like going to school?"

"Sometimes. It depends what classes I'm taking, but I like learning, especially about music. Except when the teachers are trying to force their agendas down my throat. But I'm aware of their narrative and I can pick up on it pretty quickly. I'm learning to navigate in a world that accepts sin and debauchery as an art form."

"Logan, the more I get to know you, the more I like you. I mean, you say some pretty awesome stuff."

He smiled. "You're very good for my ego today. You like how I kiss you, you like the stuff I say. I feel like pounding my chest."

She giggled. "And now you've messed it all up."

He chuckled, leaned forward, and unconsciously touched the bruise on her cheek that was only slightly visible today. "What time do you get off?"

"As soon as I finish this laundry."

"Would you like to grab something to eat with me?"

"I would love that, as long as you keep it casual because I'm not dressed."

He looked her over. She wore jeans and a button-down shirt with rolled up sleeves. The shirt was a faded plaid and lightweight and had the first three buttons unbuttoned. Underneath he could see a white tank top and a tiny gold chain with a cross. Very feminine. Her long, brown hair was up in a ponytail. If she wore makeup, he couldn't tell.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

He shook himself out of the trance. "Sorry, I was looking at you. You said you weren't dressed and I was thinking how beautiful you look in just jeans and that casual shirt and your plain white sneakers. So cute. So— perfect."

She swallowed and looked down at herself. The way he said the simple words in a soft, reverent way made her shiver.

"So, how much laundry do we need to get done?"

She smiled. "Why? Are you gonna help me?"

He grinned. "Sure."

"I need to fold this load and the one that's in the dryer and then take it upstairs and put it in their drawers."

"Okay. So, like, do you know which shirts belong to which kid?"

"Well, the ones with butterflies and flowers on them belong to Angelina. Then just peek inside. Miss Shelley has written the boys' names inside the collar of each shirt."

"Got it." He lifted a green and blue striped shirt and folded it.

Melody nodded. "Good job. You did that perfectly."

He grinned. "JoJo and I have helped Mom out with laundry and she showed us how to fold Em's things so that she can see which shirt it is so she can pick out the clothes she wants."

"That Emily, what a beautiful little girl she is. Those big blue eyes and that long hair with those ringlets. She's adorable."

"I agree. It's funny. My mom has blue eyes and black hair. My dad has brown eyes and brown hair. You'd think the brown eyes would be dominant,

but she got Mom's eyes."

"So did you."

He frowned. "Yeah, but my bio dad, he also had blue eyes."

"Oh, yeah, sorry."

He put down the shirt he just folded and put his hands on her waist and turned her to look at him. "And you, Melody, you have this luscious brown hair that looks like caramel, and these amazing hazelish greenish eyes, and the prettiest smile." He looked at her lips as they smiled. "I think you might be the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

"Get out much?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. And in my family, I'm surrounded by beautiful women."

"That is a very sweet thing to say."

"You remind me of someone, maybe someone I've seen in a movie or something," he said.

She thought. "I had a friend tell me I look just like Elizabeth Olsen."

He thought. "That might be it, only you're prettier and a LOT younger."

She laughed. "Thanks for that."

"And your nose is more turned up, and your lips are prettier, and your hair is longer and shinier."

"So, in other words, I look nothing like her."

✝✝✝

Ecclesiastes 3:8

"A time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

November 18th, 4:45 PM, Monday Afternoon
Macks Burger Shack, Huntington Beach, California

Sixteen-year-old Phillip Keith and his fourteen-year-old brother, Lyle, headed into their favorite place to grab a quick burger. It was a regular haunt because the burgers were big, they were generous with their fries, and their shake machine was always working, unlike a few other places around there.

They walked in and were immediately yelled at from across the small joint by a few guys from the Oceanside football team. Phil smiled and raised his hand in greeting before he approached the counter. The two boys ordered two deluxe burgers, extra-large fries, one chocolate shake, and one vanilla shake and two of those giant chocolate chip cookies from the huge glass cookie jar sitting on the counter between the two registers.

The owner of the place walked up from the back and nodded at the two boys. "How's it goin', guys?"

Phillip smiled. "Hey, Mr. Grassley. Goin' good."

"That was a tough game, last Friday. But that was a great score."

"Thanks."

"We'll get 'em next year."

Phillip nodded. "Yes, sir."

The boys moved aside so the next people could order their food. They were standing off to one side when Lyle nudged his brother. "Phil, look at what just walked in."

Phillip turned and looked to see Cade Kessler come through the glass doors. Their eyes met. Cade obviously recognized him and nodded at him. Phil couldn't believe it. Did Cade think they didn't know what he had done to their sister? Phil glared at him.

Cade got in line behind a couple of people and spoke. "So, what, Phil, you can't say hello to an old friend?"

Phil narrowed his eyes and looked at him. "Are you kidding me? After what you did to my sister? Don't talk to me."

"What did she tell you? I'm sure she's got it all out of proportion."

"Well, that bruise on her face is definitely there," Phil said.

"She deserved that," Cade said smugly.

Phillip started to move forward but Lyle grabbed his arm. "Don't. He's not worth it."

"That's right, little boy. Better hold your brother back before he gets in over his head."

Phillip shook his head. “At least I have a head on my shoulders.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I don’t drive around desperate over an old girlfriend who’s made it clear that she doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

“You better watch what you’re saying,” Cade said, his voice menacing.

“And, I don’t drive past some girl’s house a hundred times a day desperate to get a glimpse of her.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Oh, right, except we have it on camera, you degenerate stalker.”

Cade looked around at the people at the counter who suddenly turned and looked at him. He glared at Phillip. “You’re lying and you’d better shut your mouth or I’m gonna shut it for you.”

“I’m not scared of some punk who harasses girls because he’s not man enough to hold onto a girlfriend.”

Cade growled as he charged Phillip. He plowed into the teenager and took him to the floor. Cade’s fists were swinging and he bashed Phil’s nose. Lyle jumped on Cade’s back and tried to pull him off his brother, but Cade rose and slung Lyle across the small area. Lyle hit his head on the wooden bench and slipped to the floor, dazed. People waiting for their food scrambled to get out of the way. Lyle’s effort at intervention did give Phil a chance to stand back up, and he immediately kicked to Cade’s face.

Cade turned quickly and started throwing punches, plowing his fist repeatedly into Phil’s face. Phillip got in a few punches of his own, and then dove at Cade to take him down. They fell to the floor together, rolling around, each trying to get the advantage. Then Cade used the counter to pull himself back up. Phillip was right behind him, struggling to stand, but Cade grabbed the large heavy glass canister that held the chocolate chip cookies and brought it down on Phillip’s head. The glass broke, cookies went flying and Phillip fell unconscious and bloody to the floor, but that didn’t stop Cade from kicking him. The store manager and the friends of Phillip who’d been in the restaurant eating, jumped on Cade, but in his rage, he was able to throw them off. They didn’t give up though.

The Ameritech agent assigned to Cade had followed him into the parking lot. He watched him through the glass window. Cade was standing in line and moving his head in a jerky way that made the agent feel like something was going down. He decided to head in and as he did he heard a ruckus and saw people scrambling away from the windows. He immediately called in for police backup as he ran inside and jumped into the fray. Between him, Phil’s friends and the store manager they were finally able to wrestle Cade away from Phil. Only a minute later, the cops arrived.

✝✝✝

November 18th, 5:15 PM, Monday Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Logan watched as Melody placed each stack of shirts, pants, shorts, and underwear in each child’s drawers. He’d tried to help, but she took over,

somewhat impatiently, which made him smile. She'd already hung up several little dresses of Angelina's and several dress shirts of the boys. She was smiling as she worked. She seemed more mature than a young girl who'd just graduated from high school just earlier this year. Maybe she *was* more mature. She'd been working since she was fifteen years old in order to save up to buy her car. She was proud that she'd worked hard for her car and paid for it by herself. Logan was also proud of her.

He smiled at her as she turned. "All done?"

She nodded. "Yep. Let me go tell Miss Shelley and the babies goodbye and grab my purse and we can go."

He nodded, and stopped to pull his phone out when it buzzed. He frowned. "It's my uncle."

Melody stopped to see what the call was about.

"Hey Uncle Joey, everything okay?"

"Unfortunately, no. Are you with Melody?"

"Um, yes, sir, she's right here. We're at the Grands'. We were just getting ready to go eat."

"Put me on speaker."

He pushed the button. "Okay, Uncle Joey, go ahead."

"Cade made an appearance today. He happened into the same burger joint that Melody's brothers were at. They had words. There was a fight. Cade has been arrested. Both Phil and Lyle have been taken to the hospital. Preliminary assessment is Lyle is gonna be okay. Phil, however, is in critical condition with a severe head injury."

Melody gasped. Her hands flew to her mouth, her eyes widened, and then immediately filled with tears.

"Is he conscious?" Logan asked.

"He had not regained consciousness before they took him in the ambulance. We'll know more soon. Melody's parents have been contacted and are on the way to *Redwood Hills.* I tried to call Melody but she wasn't answering her phone, so I called you. Bring her to the hospital. We can get her car for her later. I don't want her driving right now."

"Yes, sir, we're on the way." He put his phone away and turned to Melody. She immediately threw herself against him and he wrapped his arms around her. "Okay, I've got you. Come on, let's get your things. We're going to him. I think you left your phone in the laundry room."

She nodded. He took her hand and led her down the stairs. He told his grandmother the news and left her the keys to Melody's car in case they needed to move it.

Shelley took Melody by the shoulders. "We'll pray for your brothers. Jeffy and Cam will be home any minute and I'll send her to the hospital. She's an expert in neurological medicine. It's gonna be okay, sweetie. Hold on, okay?"

Melody nodded her head.

"Grandma, will you get the family to pray?" Logan asked.

"Absolutely. Go. I'll call Gabe and Taylor. They'll handle it."

✝✝✝

November 18th, 7:00 PM, Monday Night

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

Melody Keith knelt in front of her mother where she sat in a private surgical waiting room, holding her hand and speaking words of comfort to her. Her father, unable to sit still, paced back and forth.

Logan had run out after Lyle, who was having a difficult time. He caught up to him and took him by the shoulders. "Lyle, I know how you're feeling."

"How could you know?" Lyle said fiercely, trying to hold back his emotions.

"Come on, sit down over here and I'll tell you how I know." He led him to an empty table outside of the cafeteria that overlooked a courtyard.

"My brother and I were briefly kidnapped once. We were both beaten up pretty bad, but JoJo was hurt much worse than me. We were about your age. We were taken from our high school parking lot. They broke my arm and kicked me a few times. But Jo," he stopped, shook his head. "But JoJo tried to fight them and they beat him unconscious and they cut a big 'X' into his chest. So for me, they just had to set my arm in a cast and watch me for a slight concussion. But JoJo, he was messed up. He had slipped in and out of a coma for a while. His concussion was severe and they thought he might have brain damage. But with prayer and with my Aunt Jeffy watching over him, he made it. And obviously, his brain healed, cuz ya can't think that fast on your feet if your brain is damaged.

"But here's the thing. I was filled with guilt. I should've done more. I should've fought harder. I didn't fight hard enough so that my brother wouldn't have to take the beating he took. And not only that, I just couldn't stand the thought that my brother was hurt, that he was suffering. My brother, who was everything to me, was lying in a hospital bed, going in and out of consciousness and I didn't know if he'd survive, and if he did, would he be like, changed? Like with a permanent disability from a brain injury?"

Lyle nodded. "That is exactly how I feel."

"Well first, Lyle, it's not your fault. And I'm sure that you did everything you could. The stitches in your head and your concussion are evidence that you fought back."

"Yeah, but, he threw me off him like I was a lightweight."

Logan nodded. "Because you *are* compared to him. Cade is a big dude. And he's a man compared to a young kid. So, he's older, bigger and stronger. You don't have the muscle mass. You have the endurance. You're in better shape, but you don't have the strength yet. But you will. You will, I promise. You're just young. So, of course he tossed you away. But don't be ashamed of that. Us guys don't even reach our prime until we're about twenty-five or twenty-six and all the way to age thirty. But you didn't fail, Lyle. You went after a grown man who was beating your brother, even though you knew he could hurt you. Shoot, Lyle, the stitches in your head prove you didn't run away. You did everything you could."

Logan reached over and put his hand on Lyle's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself. Don't feel guilty. And I know JoJo will tell you that Phil will not be thinking that you failed him. He'll be glad that you didn't get hurt as badly as him. I know that because JoJo convinced me of that."

Lyle breathed a sigh. Logan kept his hand on Lyle's shoulder and closed his eyes. "Father, thank You for Lyle, who loves his brother so much. I ask, Father, that you bless him with peace in his mind and heart and with comfort, and mostly, please, bless and heal Phillip so that his life won't be destroyed by this. Still, Father, we love you and understand that Your will must be done, however, we ask for a good outcome here today and no matter what we'll remain grateful for Your presence and care. Thank you, Father. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen."

Logan felt immediate peace come into his heart and he smiled up at Lyle. "Did you feel that?"

"I'm not sure what you're feeling. But I do feel calmer and not so sick in my stomach."

Logan nodded. "Yep. God comforted us. He gave us peace. That sick feeling of dread went away, if only for a bit, because we lose faith and it comes back. But when I pray about something and suddenly feel at peace for a moment or two, I know that somehow, everything is gonna be okay. It may not be guaranteed to be what *I* want, but I trust God."

Lyle nodded and offered a slight smile. "Trust God."

Smiling, Logan rose. "Let's get back to see if there's any word yet."

They stood and headed back to the private waiting room. There was no word yet. Mr. Keith approached Lyle. "You okay, son?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir. Logan and I talked and prayed together and I feel much better."

David Keith nodded at Logan. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, sir."

Melody smiled at Logan. Her heart swelled with emotion. Everyone turned when the door opened and JoJo walked in.

"Any news yet?" JoJo asked.

Logan shook his head. "Aunt Jeffy's here and she's with Phil."

"Good, then he's in the best hands."

JoJo went to Phil's parents. He shook David's hand and then took Carol Keith's hands in his own. "I'm sorry this happened. I have a calm feeling though, that he's gonna be okay, so hold onto that thought."

"Thank you," Carol said softly.

A minute later, Ricky, Mark and Joey walked into the room. They heard the same thing JoJo had just heard and responded the same way.

"So," Ricky began. "Have you circled up yet?" He looked at JoJo.

"No, sir," JoJo said. "I mean, I just got here."

Logan smiled at the look of confusion on Melody's face. "He's asking if we've prayed yet."

Ricky nodded and smiled at the group. "Let's circle up, everyone who

wants to pray for Phillip."

Everyone stood and formed a circle. They held hands. Ricky prayed.

Lyle smiled as he heard almost the same words that Logan had just said in their prayer. He looked around at the people in the room. It was strange to Lyle, but the people in the room, he could like, feel their power. He was only fourteen. Just a kid. But he decided right then and there that he wanted to be like these people. What he didn't realize was his own father, David Keith, was thinking the exact same thing.

After they prayed, Ricky spoke softly to David while Mark spoke to Melody and Carol and a few minutes later the door opened again and Bree, Gabe and Taylor, young Eric and Jordan and Grandmaster Kino walked into the room.

David and Carol stared in disbelief.

"Why are you all here?" Melody said.

"To give you and your family support," Grandmaster Kino said quickly. "Shelley said she knows you'll understand that she has the kids, but she sends her love and she is praying."

"Yes, of course we understand," Melody said. "I'm just blown away that you all would come down here tonight."

"Silly," Bree said. "We love you, Melody, and so, we'll be here for you and your family. Besides, wild elephants couldn't have kept Jordan and Taylor from your side."

Taylor immediately hugged Melody and then Jordan did the same. "Thank you so much," Melody said, tears in her eyes. "You guys are too much."

"No we're not," Gabe said. "You can never have too much support. And you have lots." He held up his phone. "So, like, the prayer warriors are at it again and right now Phil has millions of people praying for him. So far, I've only told everyone that a high school kid was seriously injured and needs prayer. I haven't shared any details or his name yet. But the prayer warriors are right now waiting to see if we wanna go live and have another prayer here at the hospital with Phil's family. So, is that a possibility?" Gabe asked. "I mean, would you be comfortable with us praying for him live? I'll understand if you don't want to because I get that some people are very private people. I know because I used to be."

"Really?" Melody asked. "So, what made you change?"

"Um, having my whole episode of being abducted and held hostage, and me crying like a baby plastered all over the internet. It sort of changes you. I learned to accept it and let my light shine." He turned and grinned at Joey, who'd given him that piece of advice way back last spring.

Joey nodded at him. "Well done, Gabe."

"So, whaddya say?" Gabe asked.

Everyone turned to look at David Keith. He looked at Carol and they both nodded. "How could we turn down having millions of people wanting to pray for our son?"

"Okay. Going live," Gabe warned. "Hey everyone. Gabe Tanner here.

Okay, Tay and I are at the hospital where the brother of our good friend Melody is, and we're gonna pray for him. His name is Phillip Keith. He's a junior in high school and I've already told you he was seriously injured. Right now, we're gonna pray for Phillip, but before we do, let me introduce you to the people present in this room." He pointed his phone at each person. "First, Phil's family—this is our friend, Melody, she's Phil's sister. Her younger brother, Lyle, her mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Keith. Of course, Taylor's here, and here's young Eric Kino and his girl, Jordan. Ricky Kino. Breanna Adams Kino. Melody's really good friend," Gabe began with a gleam in his eye, "Logan Adams, Logan's brother JoJo Adams, their father Mark Adams and *his* brother, Joey Adams. And last but not least, the man we all prayed for so much last August, Grandmaster Kino. Okay, so, who's gonna pray?"

"You go ahead," Grandmaster Kino said quietly to Gabe.

Gabe didn't argue. He nodded. He began to pray. He called upon the Holy Spirit to fill them. He offered gratitude that Phillip and Lyle were alive and that they were able to be strong enough to confront the evil that had threatened their sister. He gave thanks for God's sacrifice of His own Son on the cross. He asked God to intervene and to heal Phillip and he promised that no matter what, they only wanted God's will to be done and that they would abide by His decisions and have faith in His plan for us. As always, he prayed in Jesus' name and ended the prayer.

He smiled into the camera. "So, thanks everyone. That was awesome. I mean, I could feel your spirits and how strongly you prayed. You guys, the prayer warriors, you are the best and you are making a huge difference in this world. I just want you to know how much I appreciate you and how much God loves you for volunteering to do His work. Okay, well, I'm signing off and as soon as we hear something, we'll let you know. Bye from me and..." He pointed the camera at Taylor. "Tay, say bye. I knew they wanted to see your beautiful face one more time before I ended the livestream."

Taylor smiled and waved at the camera. "Bye everyone. Thanks so much. You're the best."

Gabe ended the call.

Bree smiled. "Gabe, you're getting good at that."

"Thanks, Mrs. Kino. I'm not as nervous as I used to be."

Melody glanced around at her parents and brother to see their reaction to the powerful people in the room. Her mother had tears in her eyes. Her father had a look of peace on his face. Lyle was actually smiling. There was a powerful presence in the room and suddenly, she realized, it seemed like everything really *was* gonna be alright.

It was over an hour later that the door to the room opened and Jeffy Kino came in, wearing blue scrubs and a kind smile on her face. She went toward Phil's parents who immediately stood. "Sorry it took so long. Okay, first, so that you can listen to everything else I have to tell you, Phillip is stable, the surgery went well, and we have very good reason to expect him to recover."

There was an audible sigh of relief from most everyone in the room.

"Phillip suffered an open depressed skull fracture from the blunt force impact to his head. He also had a four-inch laceration that exposed the skull. A section of bone was pressing inward, so we elevated and repaired it, thoroughly cleaned the wound, and closed the laceration. His CT scan also showed a small hematoma, but it is not currently creating dangerous pressure. We'll continue monitoring it closely."

"Is he conscious?" David asked.

Jeffy smiled. "He woke after surgery, was able to follow simple instructions, knew his name, and miraculously spoke to me. Those are extremely encouraging signs."

Gabe smiled and tapped his heart. Others in the room became emotional. Several raised their heads or pointed fingers heavenward and quickly gave thanks. Melody put her arm around her mother.

"You said he spoke? What did he say?" David Keith asked.

She smiled. "He asked if his brother was okay."

Logan grinned and put his arm around Lyle's shoulders.

Jeffy nodded. "We're moving Phillip to the ICU, where we'll keep a very close watch on him, do neurological checks and repeat the imaging if necessary. He'll be drowsy from the injury and from meds and the anesthesia. He's doing well, but we expect him to remain here several days. When he goes home of course, no strenuous physical activity for several weeks. When he goes back to school will be assessed later, but you can expect at least two weeks out." She paused and smiled. "He's awake for the most part, drifting in and out of sleep and I'm sure he'd like to see his family. As soon as we get him situated in the ICU, we'll send a nurse to bring you back, two at a time."

"Will there be any brain damage?" Mr. Keith asked.

"It's too early to promise that there won't be temporary problems with memory, concentration, headaches, or fatigue. His ability to wake, speak, and follow instructions is very reassuring, but we'll evaluate him continually. And again, his return to school will depend upon his symptoms but he absolutely cannot return to sports or strenuous activities until we clear him through a gradual recovery process.

"There's a possibility at first that he may not remember what happened. Or only remember part of what happened. We'll keep an eye on him and do some testing later, once the initial injury has healed. I'm sure you'll have more questions as we go along, and I'll be available whenever you do." She extended her hand to Mr. Keith.

He shook her hand and nodded his head, his voice emotional. "Thank you, Dr. Kino. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure. And I mean that." She turned to Mrs. Keith who bypassed the handshake and threw her arms around Jeffy. "Thank you so much, Dr. Kino," she cried. "Thank you."

"Thank God," Jeffy said softly.

Jeffy turned to speak to Melody privately. "Sweetie, you okay?"

Melody nodded. "Jeffy, thank you. I'm so grateful. I guess you need to get

back to your baby."

She grinned. "I'm going. Cam needed the time alone with his son anyway, so no worries. I tend to take over when I'm around. I try to not do that where my husband is concerned."

"Why?"

Jeffy's eyebrows rose. "Well, he's a man. A very intelligent and powerful man. Highly skilled. Highly lethal. Special forces. And my super brain tends to take over everything, and that's not healthy for a marriage. It's not that he doesn't know that my IQ is higher. It's a fact and he's very appreciative of my skills and he respects and admires me. But he's my protector and my mate and he keeps me in check when I go a little overboard about things, which I tend to do. Sometimes I need to back off and let him lead."

Melody nodded. "Interesting."

"And to be honest, it feels good to do that. I trust him. And that means I can relax my mind and just follow. I love that."

"Your husband has always seemed so quiet."

"He's serious, not quiet. But when he's vocal, he's very vocal."

"Logan seems to also be quiet. I don't really know him that well yet, but, I don't know, he's like a strong quiet."

"Logan is a very special young man. He is quiet, like you say, but he's also very brave, and has a strong sense of right and wrong. He's not afraid to stand up and do what's right. And he's also not afraid to show his sensitive side, which he does through his music quite often."

Melody glanced over at him as he spoke to her brother and his brothers. She smiled. "Yeah, his music, I love it when he sings. He totally, like, melts me. I know that sounds silly."

"No it doesn't, cuz he melts me too. That voice. And when I heard you two sing together, I thought I'd gone to heaven."

Melody smiled.

Jeffy hugged her. "I'm gonna go check on Phillip one more time before I go home."

"Thanks again," Melody said.

In the room, Joey pulled his phone out and stepped away from everyone to hear the report. "Go ahead."

He listened, sighed, then tucked his phone away.

Ricky caught Joey's eye. "News?"

Joey nodded. The room quieted to hear what Joey had to report.

"Okay, so, Ameritech's law-enforcement liaison worked with stadium officials and local police. We were able to get video footage that showed Cade grabbing Melody and pulling her out of line at the concession stand Friday night. The camera angle doesn't show what happened beside the building, but the footage supports her statement.

"The owner of Mack's Burger Shack also voluntarily turned over today's security footage. It clearly shows Cade initiating the physical attack. Our agent was following Cade and witnessed the assault. He called police and helped

restrain Cade." Joey stopped and looked at Lyle. "Some people say that Phillip egged him on by calling him a pervert or something to that effect, and also that he wasn't much of a man."

Lyle nodded. "Yes, sir. They argued. But, really, we wouldn't have spoken to him at all. When we saw him walk in, we were just gonna ignore him, but he kept talking to us like we were old friends and like we didn't know what he'd done to our sister at the football game. Phil told him not to speak to us after what he did to Melody, but he kept talking. And then Cade said 'she deserved what she got' and then Phil got really mad, and then Phil called him out for chasing after Mel. I don't remember exactly what words he used, maybe pervert, or maybe stalker. I'm not sure, but something like that."

Joey nodded. "We will need to get a statement from Phillip eventually, if he even remembers."

"We, Ameritech, or we, the cops?" Mark asked.

"It's a joint effort. Ameritech is supporting the investigation by preserving and providing its surveillance, video and witness evidence," Joey explained. "The police of course, will conduct the official criminal interviews. One of our investigators may speak with Phillip later if he and his parents agree. But the *cops* will question Phillip sometime tomorrow morning if he's able. The police already have statements from eight witnesses at the scene. Three of them say they distinctly heard Cade say, 'I'm gonna kill you,' right before he bashed Phil's head with the glass canister." He looked at Lyle.

Lyle nodded. "Yeah, he did say that."

"That's good," Mark said. "That statement matters. It supports the argument that Cade intended to kill Phillip. It won't determine the charge by itself, but combined with the video evidence, and the fact that he continued kicking Phil after he was unconscious, that might up the charge to attempted murder and that ups the bail, hopefully above what his family can afford."

Melody looked up quickly from where she'd been sitting and listening. "Bail? That means he's gonna get out?"

Mark smiled kindly at her. "The judge will make that decision. Still, attempted murder carries an extremely high bail, and the prosecutor can ask that he be held without bail if they can show releasing him would place you or your family in danger."

"But either way, we'll protect you, Melody," Logan said. "Don't be afraid."

"You'll protect me, but what about my brothers?"

"We'll protect them too," Ricky said quickly. "And your parents."

"For how long? I mean, you can't do that forever," she cried. "I'm so sorry, Mom, Dad, I brought this on our family. I'm so sorry."

Logan put his arm around her. "Melody, you didn't bring this on. Cade made every one of these choices. And there's no way you could have known that some high school boyfriend could become so unbalanced and cause your family this grief. None of this belongs to you."

"As for your question," Ricky said, "we'll protect you and your entire family as long as necessary, if and when he gets out on bail and up until he's

convicted or pleads guilty, though I wouldn't hold my breath for that."

"I doubt he'll plead," Mark added, "but the evidence against him is strong."

They all looked up as the nurse came in the room. "Mr. and Mrs. Keith?"

They stood and nodded at her. She smiled at them. "You can come back."

✝✝✝

Once Carol and David Keith returned to the waiting room, Melody and Lyle went in to see their brother. Like their parents, they were disturbed by the look of him. His face was bruised and swollen. Both eyes were black. He was alert though, he was talking in a very broken way, and he was tired. He and Lyle shared a short conversation, mostly about Phillip being worried about Lyle and at the same time, brushing away Lyle's concern for him.

Melody cried and leaned down and kissed his forehead. "I love you, Phillip," she said softly. "I know I don't say that enough, but I want you to know that I do. And I'm proud of you and I'm so sorry."

"What—are you—sorry for," he asked quietly.

"For making you feel like you had to step in and defend my honor."

He tried to smile. "I wasn't—Mel—it's not always—about you. I just—always—hated that guy."

She laughed through her tears.

"Phil, you are such a guy. And for whatever reason, everyone likes you."

"Who's—everyone?"

"The whole waiting room is full of people here to support you."

"Who?"

She named them all off. "And, Gabe and Taylor did a live video and there are millions of viewers praying for you."

"Wow."

"And my phone has been blowing up," Lyle said. "All the guys on the team are calling to see if you're okay. And I think Dad said Coach Steele called him to check on you."

"Cool," Phil said softly. "Hey—guys—I need—to see—Logan and JoJo."

"Why?" Melody asked.

"Nunya," he said, as he tried to smile.

She smiled and squeezed his hand. "Okay, well, get better, Phil. I need you to be all better."

He nodded. "Workin' on it."

"Love ya, brother," Lyle said quickly.

He smiled and closed his eyes. A few minutes later he opened them again when Logan and JoJo leaned over either side of his bed and took his hands.

"Hey bud," Logan said.

Phil tried to smile. "Hey guys." He stopped, drew a breath. "I tried to—make him—attack me—so that—he'd go to jail—and not be able—to get to Mel." He stopped again and breathed several times to catch his breath.

Logan and JoJo looked at each other, then back at Phillip.

"You deliberately provoked him?" JoJo asked softly.

Phillip nodded. "I knew—your Dad is a lawyer—Make sure—he stays in

jail."

"Um, well, Dad is all over this," JoJo said quickly. "He's working with your fam and the DA, and the evidence is strong."

Logan nodded and squeezed Phil's hand. "Yeah, but Phil, buddy, don't ever do anything like that again. Look, I know you love your sister and you want to protect her, but you don't have to get yourself killed to prove it."

"That's right," JoJo added. "There are safer ways to protect your family. Your job now is to recover and then just tell the truth about what happened."

"Yep," Logan said. "My dad, your dad, the cops, the DA and Ameritech, they got this. So no worries. And Uncle Rick says Ameritech is gonna protect you and Lyle and Melody and your parents, so don't worry. The main thing now is for you to get better. And no stressing."

"That's right," JoJo added. "No stressing. We got this for ya, Phil. Now focus on getting well."

Phil smiled. "I will if—you focus—on winning—Saturday."

JoJo smiled and nodded. "Deal."

✞✞✞

The week was a hectic one, with visits to the hospital and prayer circles, college exams and high school midterm exams. It was hard for Jordan and Logan and Taylor to focus on their studies. It was even harder for JoJo who had exams and the biggest game of his life so far hanging in the balance.

Gabe and young Eric helped with the errands and shopping that had to take place for the trip to Georgia. They would all be flying out early in the morning on Monday following the big Saturday game.

Melody was given the week off to be able to be with her family. Phillip spoke to the police first thing Tuesday morning. He was already starting to heal. His speech was much smoother and repeat imaging showed that the small hematoma had not increased. He was moved from the ICU to the IMCU, the Intermediate Care Unit. Gabe visited him and did a livestream at Phil's request to thank everyone for praying for him.

Also on Tuesday morning, the district attorney filed charges that included the attempted murder of Phillip, assault with a deadly weapon, and assault against Lyle. Cade was also charged with false imprisonment and battery in connection with what he had done to Melody, while investigators continued assembling evidence of stalking and criminal threats.

Bail on the attempted-murder charge was initially set at five hundred thousand dollars. At Cade's first court appearance, the prosecutor intended to ask that he remain in custody because his escalating conduct made him a danger to Melody and her family. For the moment, Cade remained in jail.

Mark looked into the Kessler public property and financial records. They suggested that Cade's parents would have difficulty posting a large bond. Ameritech's background investigation also revealed that Cade and his father had not spoken in over a year. Something was not quite right in that family. Mark wondered whether Cade's father might possess information that would help explain his son's escalating behavior. Before approaching him, however,

Mark would make certain that contact was legally and ethically appropriate. Who knows, he may be able to do some good.

On Wednesday afternoon, Phillip was moved to a regular room. If Thursday's neurological examination and scans remained stable, Jeffy believed he could recover at home under strict instructions to rest and immediately report any returning symptoms. On Wednesday evening, Logan stopped in to see him, as different members of Logan's family had done all week.

"Hi Logan!" Phillip beamed as he came into the room.

Logan smiled and approached the bed. "Hey kiddo. You sound great. You're lookin' great. The bandage is gone."

"No, there's still a bandage, just smaller." He tilted his head down.

Logan nodded. "Oh, I see." He studied the area for a moment and shook his head. "So, did they tell you when you might be gettin' outta this joint?"

Phil smiled. "Dr. Kino said there's a possibility that I might be able to go home tomorrow evening. They're gonna do an examination and run tests tomorrow and if all goes well, I could be headed home this time tomorrow."

Logan frowned. "That's really fast isn't it?"

"Well, Dr. Kino says I'm healing well. Extraordinarily well, was how she put it." He smiled. "Maybe it's all the prayers I've received."

Logan smiled. "Maybe. Probably. I mean, Monday night, you could barely speak. Today you seem back to normal."

He grinned. "I know, right!"

"So," Logan began, "has Melody come in to see you today?"

Phillip nodded with a smile. "Finally, the real reason you came to see me."

Logan laughed. "Ya got me there. Or, I'd say it was a twofold reason."

Phillip pointed toward the door. "She was here. She's somewhere in the hospital. She said she was gonna go find a bite to eat." He sighed. "So, tell me about you two. Are you like, a thing?"

Logan smiled. "In my mind we are. Has she officially agreed to be my girlfriend? No. Not yet. But I haven't actually asked her either."

"You need to get to it," Phil said.

"I will. You got hurt and it's not been a good time to focus on her and me."

"Don't use me as an excuse. Just do it."

Logan nodded. "Well, as long as I have your permission."

"Are you kidding me? You're the best thing that ever happened to her. I mean, she had Cade as a boyfriend for a few years and he broke up with her at the end of her junior year, and then her senior year, she had like three different boyfriends but nothing worked out."

"Lucky for me," Logan said.

"Yeah, and her too. Before Cade, she had a boyfriend that was a pretty cool guy, but he moved away and that really hurt her. She cried a lot."

Logan frowned. The thought of Melody crying over a lost relationship was sad. "So, I guess you're saying that I have your approval?"

"Uh, sure, not like you need it." He smiled. "So, like, I mean, you really like her, don't ya?"

"I didn't realize that Melody's quiet little brother was so pushy."

Phillip laughed. "Yeah, I guess I am sometimes." He shrugged. "And I guess that's what got my head bashed in."

Logan laughed.

"Hey!" Melody said as she came into the room.

Logan turned and smiled. The ache in his heart eased immediately. "Hey, there Melody."

"What are you two laughing about?"

"About my head gettin' bashed in," Phillip said.

Melody frowned. "Well, I don't think that's very funny."

"Me neither," Phil said.

Logan couldn't help it; he reached out and grabbed her hand. He had to touch her.

She smiled up into his face. "Logan, it's very sweet for you to come to see my little brother."

"He wasn't bein' sweet," Phil said. "He was pretending to visit me but coming to see you."

"Oh," Melody said, her eyes twinkling.

Logan smiled. "I was coming to do both."

"So, what did you want to see me about?" Melody asked.

He shrugged. "Well, I haven't seen you since I took your car back to you Tuesday morning and that was only for about fifteen minutes, and, I guess I missed you."

She smiled. "I missed you too."

"And like, the big game is Saturday."

"I know."

"And I was wondering if you'll come with me?"

"Oh! Well, I don't know. I mean, I've been to a few games now, but I was working. I wonder if Miss Shelley wants me to work."

"Well if she does, I can work with you because she's going. And you still have to get to the game, if you're working so there shouldn't be a problem with me bringing you."

She nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I still need to talk to my parents."

"They'll say yes," Phil said. "I wish I could go."

Logan smiled knowingly. "I wish you could too. Let's just see if you'll even be home by then."

Phil nodded. "So, is JoJo psyched up?"

"I think he's focused."

"So, man, I was just wondering, like, how often do the two of you talk?"

Logan's brow furrowed. "Well, so, we live in the same house, ya know. We talk pretty much every day."

"I mean, are you like, good friends or does he see you as a bother."

"A bother? As far as I know, he's never seen me as a bother. We've always had great respect for each other. We're brothers and best friends. We're only a year apart in age."

"So, doesn't that mean that you, like, compete with each other?"

"For what?"

"I don't know, maybe for your parents' attention?"

Logan glanced at Melody. "That doesn't really happen. Not because we're special or anything, but we were friends first. I was adopted."

"Oh!" Phillip grimaced. "Oh, sorry, man. I didn't know. So, I mean, you were his friend?"

"Yeah. My dad—JoJo's biological father—was my martial arts instructor. I met him when I was nine when my mother signed me up to take classes. My mom took lessons too. Master Mark, that's what we called him at the time, got to be really good friends with my mother. Well, anyway, it's a long story. But bottom line, my mother and JoJo's father got married and JoJo and I became brothers. Master Mark adopted me as his own."

"What happened to your father? Did he allow you to be adopted?"

"My biological father died."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"So, you two don't compete for attention because you have your mom, and he has his father."

Logan shook his head. "My mom loves JoJo like her own son. And Dad loves me like his own son. Neither JoJo nor I have ever doubted that at all." He smiled. "So, why all the questions about brothers?"

Phil shrugged. "I thought Lyle was hurt bad. All I could think about was what a crappy brother I'd been to him."

"I doubt that."

"You don't know. But anyway, I watched you and JoJo, the way you talk to each other. He's your older brother, but it doesn't seem like you bother him at all. And like, he's got to be the coolest older brother to have, and like, you don't seem jealous or anything."

Logan smiled. "I'm not jealous. I love my brother and want only his happiness. Every win he has makes me happy, and I'm not just talkin' about a win on the field. And JoJo is not jealous of me and what I might accomplish, because he wants only *my* happiness. And, Phil, I think you got a man crush thing goin' on," Logan said with a chuckle.

Phil smiled. "Well, JoJo is like, amazing."

"Why? Because he plays football?"

"He doesn't just play football. He's one of the top QBs in the nation. He's a Heisman candidate. He's humble, but he's tough. And with everything he's got goin' on, he took time to come see me in the hospital."

"Well, the most important thing you just named out of all that is he came to see you."

"You're not proud of his football stuff?"

"Of course I am. I'm proud of him, of how hard he's worked, of all of his accomplishments, but he'd be the first one to tell you that all of that is not as important as helping others. JoJo would tell you that what he truly wants to do

is find out what God wants him to do, and then do *that* with all of his heart. Right now, it may be football. Later, it may be something else. The football is not what's important, though JoJo made it important by using it to set a good example of honor, integrity, and teamwork, and good sportsmanship, and leadership. He's done all that. JoJo is the best, and I love my brother, but just know, that football is his side hustle."

"Interesting."

Melody smiled. Her heart felt as though it might burst. This guy standing here next to her brother's hospital bed, he seemed to have all of his priorities straight. He loved his brother. He loved his family. He loved God. He loved his music. And he seemed to really like her. She didn't want to give her heart away again, only to have it broken, but how could she not be head over heels for this guy? He was almost too good to be true, and that thought made her afraid. But not afraid enough to walk away. Because she missed him when he wasn't around. Missed him badly. She craved his, what? His light? When he was in a room, it seemed much brighter. That sounded dumb in her head, but it was actually the truth. He was a bright light. Like Gabe Tanner. How lucky was she to have his attention? And she wanted to give her heart to him, and she intended to do that very thing. *So, please, Logan*, she thought. *Please don't hurt me. Please feel about me the way I feel about you.*

As if he'd heard her thoughts, he turned to her and smiled. "I have to go. Young Eric, Gabe and I are supposed to put up a new trampoline at the grands' house."

"Oh! Well, that sounds like it will be a load of fun."

"Yeah, Grandma said that Aunt Bree, Uncle Joey and Dad had a trampoline when they were young, and they had a whole lot of great memories on the tramp and she wants one for the new kids, so, I gotta go help, but, will you talk with me privately for a few minutes?"

"Sure."

He smiled and turned to Phil. "You keep gettin' better, big guy. And keep up all that deep thinkin'. All the questions you asked, it reminds me of someone and that makes me think you're pretty special yourself."

Phil frowned. "Who do I remind you of?"

"Gabe Tanner. He thinks deeply about things and asks a lot of questions. He's totally cool and has spoken to Jesus pretty much like face to face. So, you, Phil, keep up the good work." He shook his hand. "See ya soon."

Logan took Melody's hand and left the room.

They walked down the corridor in silence. He saw a small, empty waiting room and headed in there and closed the door behind him. Immediately, he leaned against the door and pulled Melody up close to him.

"I thought I was gonna go crazy before I got you alone again."

"Me too."

"Really?" he said. "That's nice to hear."

She reached out and placed her hand on his chest. He covered her hand with his and closed his eyes briefly.

"Melody, I don't know what to do about this, this, missing you when you're not around kinda thing."

"I'm happy to hear you say that, Logan, because I miss you too. I start missing you the moment you're gone."

"I'm glad you do, because I'd hate to be in this situation all alone," he said softly, as he bent his head and gently rubbed his lips over her cheek.

She sighed.

He grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger, raised it slightly and kissed her. She pressed both hands against his chest and stood on her toes to try to get closer. He wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her snug against him and used the other hand to cup her face.

Finally, he pulled away, breathing hard and looked into her eyes. "What is this?" He sighed. "What is goin' on?"

She swallowed, afraid to say the thing that would chase him away. She was good at that. She only looked deeply into his blue eyes.

He smiled. "You look so innocent looking up at me like that. Like, you don't know what to say."

"That's because I don't."

"Tell me what you're thinking, Melody. Please."

"I'm—afraid."

"I frighten you?" He drew a breath. "Melody, I would never hurt you."

"I believe you would never hurt me physically. But, I'm afraid of being hurt, like, emotionally."

"How would I hurt you emotionally?"

She shrugged. "What if I like you, and you don't like me as much as I like you. Or, what if we have like, a relationship, and in a few months, you decide I'm not what you're looking for, or I'm boring, or I'm not good enough."

He rolled his eyes at the 'not good enough,' because she was so much more than 'good enough.' "So," he said, "are you saying that you're afraid that a relationship between us might not last forever?" Logan asked.

She sighed. "Well, when you put it that way, it makes my fear seem silly. I mean, I realize that dating and having relationships, that's how you find out if it will last, right?"

"Right. So, are you willing to put that fear aside and let's find out?"

"I really don't have a choice."

"Of course you have a choice. Always. Why would you say that?"

"It's not because you don't give me a choice, it's because I really don't like being away from you, so I have no choice but to dive in and hope and pray that you won't discard me. Being discarded is a fear and I don't want that fear to stand in my way and I really do want to find out where this will go."

He smiled. "You pray that I won't discard you, but, well, ya know, you might discard me, and then *I'd* be devastated."

"I'd be an idiot to discard you."

"And I'd be one to not do everything in my power to keep you by my side."

She sighed. "Well, that sounds nice."

"It does, doesn't it?"

"Tell me what you want from me, Logan. I need you to be clear, because my heart is pretty tender from past relationships."

He looked into her eyes, the understanding registering in his brain. "I want to date you, Melody. I want you to date me. I want to get to know you. And until you decide you just can't stand me, I want it to be exclusive."

"Exclusive? Like, we don't date anyone else?"

"Right. Do you want to date someone else?"

"No."

"Then why did you ask that?"

"I just want to be sure I understand. I want it to be clear."

He nodded, then sighed. "I'm not doing a very good job of this, Melody, and I've had some pretty crappy relationships too. A lot of girls only want to go out with me because I'm related to the Kinos."

Her mouth opened in surprise.

"So, I'm a little shy and a little slow about allowing myself to feel anything. But you, Melody, I get the feeling that you don't care about me being a member of the Kino family. I get the idea that you like me for just being me. I could be wrong," he added quickly. "Still, I have to admit, the first time I saw you, you took my breath away. You were like an angel. And you were gorgeous. And every time I've seen you since that day, I feel the same way. I want to date you. Actually, Melody, what I want is for us to be boyfriend and girlfriend. So there. Now I'm being honest. I know we've only been on one official date. So, don't answer me now. You asked what I want from you, well that's it. For now. Though I may want more from you at another time."

"More?" She swallowed, her face going pale.

"Wait," he said. "Don't look at me like that. I'm not Cade. I'm not talking about sex. I will never demand or even ask you to have sex with me as long as we're dating. That is reserved for marriage."

"So, the 'more' that you're talking about, what are you talking about?"

He smiled. "You really do like to get clear about everything. Okay, let me be completely clear, and I hope it doesn't scare you away. Melody, for me, the whole reason for dating someone is to find out if that someone is compatible with you, and to see if you will fall in love with that person, and if you do, to marry that person. People, well, most people, date to find their mate, their lifelong companion."

She shook her head. "A lot of people think the reason for dating is to party, and have a good time and not be lonely."

He nodded. "I believe that a lot of people have their priorities all messed up. The purpose of life is not to party. Life goes on because we find a mate, we marry, we do God's will, we have children. Those are the things that bring real happiness. Not partying and being entertained and hookin' up. So, my reason for wanting to date you, for us to be exclusive is to find a potential mate. A life mate. A spouse. A wife. Can I be any more clear?"

She smiled. "Nope, that's pretty clear. Are you angry?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "No. I don't get angry very often. I was just being very businesslike so that there is no misunderstanding. If you want to pass, do it now. Otherwise, I will consider you my girlfriend until you tell me it's not working for you."

She put her arms up around his neck. "Am I dreaming this?"

"Am I?" He pulled her close and kissed her, then pulled back. "Nope, it feels like it's real."

"It does."

He placed his hands on her waist and pushed her back so he could look into her eyes. He smiled. "Okay, so, I'll pick you up Saturday at noon. Game is at 3:00. If that doesn't work for you, let me know."

"I'll let you know," she said with a smile.

✞✞✞

2 Timothy 3:16-17

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable
for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in
righteousness, that the man of God may be complete,
equipped for every good work."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

November 23rd, 8:30 AM, Saturday Morning
Keith Home, Huntington Beach, California

Phillip smiled as he stood under the shower spray from the neck down. He'd had to promise his mother ten times that he would not get his head wet if she would only let him take a shower instead of a bath. He ended up offering his firstborn child to her to raise if he were to get his head wet and that seemed to suffice. The water felt so good on his sore body.

On Thursday, when he'd thought he'd be going home from the hospital, he got the news that the doctors had decided to keep him for one more day of observation. So, on Friday, he was ready all day to be discharged and go home, but they'd wanted to run a few more tests. Finally, at about 5:00 PM on Friday, he'd left the hospital. He'd come home, eaten a special "welcome home" dinner and gone straight to bed—but only after a surprise. The surprise was, they circled up and prayed together as a family.

His whole family had been surprised. His father mumbled something about doing better at leading his family and he was gonna start by asking if they would pray together. Phillip had been pleasantly surprised, to say the least. They were Christians. They went to church on Sundays. They tried to be honest and have integrity, but they didn't ever really pray together. They professed to believe in Jesus, but did they really? Phillip hardly ever said an individual prayer, like, by himself in his room. So, when his father asked the family to circle up, Phillip had been surprised. Then Lyle had pointed out that Ricky Kino had used the same words—"circle up"—when he'd arrived at the hospital Monday night and Phillip understood that Mr. Kino's example had affected his father.

Now, this Saturday morning, Phillip woke with a smile on his face, though it was hard to tell because his face was a mess. He had two black eyes—from the head injury, they told him—not because Cade had actually connected with his eyes. Those two black eyes had become quite colorful. He also had some bruises on his side, back and arms, but they were no big deal. Leaving the shower, he wrapped a towel around his waist and went to dress. Someone had made his bed and laid out clothes. His mom, he guessed.

He drew a deep breath as he dressed. He was home, he was alive, and some kinda miracle was being worked in both his heart and the heart of his father, and it gave him such a feeling of lightness, of happiness, almost giddiness.

He thought about the others in his family. His mom was usually tired, usually a little down, but this morning she'd actually laughed as she tried to get

him to take a bath instead of a shower. She seemed lighter and happier too. She was a really good mom. She worked hard. She worked long hours at her job, and then kept the house clean, the laundry done, and she was a great cook. She took good care of her family.

His sister, too, seemed different. Or maybe he was just seeing her differently. She was like his mom in that she worked hard. She always seemed to have a job even before she was really old enough to work outside the home. She babysat for neighbors. She walked dogs. She had a lemonade stand when they were younger. He smiled as he remembered that she got mad at him and Lyle for drinking the lemonade when she wasn't looking. He frowned. He also remembered stealing some of her quarters. Not because he wanted them, but just to see her reaction.

Now, his sister seemed calmer, or just different since she went to work for the Kinos. And especially since she met Logan Adams, who was a really nice guy. And Lyle, he was a great brother, though Phillip was thinking he'd never told him that. Phillip pretty much ignored him most of the time, though, they did talk about football. Lyle was a quarterback, whereas Phillip was a running back. Lyle wanted desperately to go to a quarterback camp last spring, but there just was no money. Maybe, now that football was over, Phillip could get some little part-time job and earn the money for Lyle to go to the camp this coming spring. Suddenly, he realized, that goal stirred his heart. Yep, he would definitely do that for his little brother.

That thought made Phillip think about what Logan had said—that Phillip reminded him of Gabe Tanner. Well, it certainly wasn't because Phillip had ever done amazing things like Gabe. But getting a job to help his little brother achieve a dream, that was definitely a Gabe Tanner move. He smiled. He was pulled from his thoughts by a knock on his door.

"Come in," he said.

Lyle poked his head in. "Hey, Phil, how ya feelin'?"

"Feelin' great." He smiled at Lyle. "And, uh, thanks for asking."

"No prob. It's a lot easier to poke my head in your bedroom instead of going to the hospital to ask you that question."

"So, how are you feeling?" Phil asked. "I know you had a concussion."

"Yeah, I'm good. I got knocked out for a few seconds, but I'm okay. And, uh, Phil, I'm sorry I wasn't more help."

"Thanks, but I didn't expect you to help. Cade is a big guy. Sorry I couldn't hold my own against him. But that's what I get for running my mouth."

Lyle frowned. "You said what I was thinking." He smiled. "Anyway, I was sent to tell you to come down for breakfast."

He finished tying his shoes and stood. "Let's go. Something smells good."

They arrived at the kitchen table. On the wall behind the table, there was a sign that read, "Welcome Home Phillip!"

He grinned. "Wow, thanks, everyone. And again, Dad, I'm sorry I caused so much trouble."

His dad shook his head. "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

Surprised, Phil looked up quickly at his father. Yeah, something definitely had changed. He looked at the table. “Mom, this looks so good.”

Carol smiled. “Well sweetie, I know you love pancakes and bacon. Okay, everyone, have a seat.”

Melody leaned down and kissed Phil’s cheek before she took her seat. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks, Mel.”

“Let’s have a blessing,” his father said.

Again, the whole family was astonished. His father smiled. “Like I said last night, I’m gonna do better leading my family. Phillip is alive and I’m grateful and I think we should do better about praying together and telling God how grateful we are.”

“Well, I think that’s wonderful,” Carol said. She took her seat. “Shall we hold hands?”

“Why not?” Phillip said quickly before anyone could veto it.

They chatted over breakfast and his father kept telling him to finish eating. They finished breakfast and Phillip was told to go brush his teeth and shave. He asked what the big rush was, and he was given some lame excuse about getting back into a routine. But at about 10:00 AM, he found out why. There was a knock on the door.

Melody went to answer. She looked out the peephole and gasped. Logan stood there with his arms full of gift boxes. Smoothing her hair, she opened the door. “Logan! You’re early. Like two hours early!”

He grinned. “I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you, but I was sworn to secrecy.”

She looked past him and saw his father, who was standing behind a wheelchair. “Mr. Adams!”

He nodded and smiled. “Good morning, Melody. May we come in? Your father is expecting us.”

“Oh! Yes of course. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. I’m just surprised that you’re here.” She stepped back, holding the door open. “Please come in.”

The Keith family gathered around, welcoming Logan and his father to their home. Lyle was sent upstairs to get Phillip. A few seconds later Lyle came galloping back down the stairs with Phil behind him.

Phillip stopped when he saw the visitors. “Oh! Hi!”

“Hey there, Phillip,” Mark Adams said. “How are you feeling?”

“Feelin’ pretty good, sir,” Phil said. “What’s goin’ on?” He looked around at his family. His father was grinning. “What’s with the wheelchair?”

“Well,” Mark said. “How would you like to go to the USC game as a VIP?”

Phillip’s mouth dropped open. “Really?” He looked to his father. “Can I?”

It was Mark who answered. “We have the approval of your doctor as long as you ride in the wheelchair. First, you get to be in the locker room with the team, then you’ll get to meet the team and the coaches, and you’ll be at the top of the ramp as they come onto the field to high five them. Then, during the game you’ll come up and sit with your family in the Kino special seats. But listen, if you get tired or start feeling bad, we also have box seating where you

can go to rest."

"And the stadium announcer will introduce you to the crowd at the beginning of the game," Logan added. "You're a VIP today."

"Wow. All because I got beat up?"

"You didn't just get beat up," Mark said. "You stepped in to defend your sister's honor. *And* you happen to know JoJo, and apparently, that has its perks," he said with a laugh. "Can we take this opportunity to do something kind for you?"

"Absolutely," Phil said. "This is awesome."

"Yep, and you're gonna need a driver to push the wheelchair, so Lyle, we're hoping you could take care of that," Mark added.

"Really? Heck yeah!" he said quickly.

"Did you say during the game I'll sit with my family?"

"I did."

"That means you're coming too Mom and Dad?"

They smiled. "Yes."

"So, *that's* why you wanted me to hurry. You guys were being so pushy trying to get me to eat and brush my teeth and shave."

Logan laughed. "And that brings me to these." He held up the boxes. "These are for the whole family," Logan said. He looked at the names on each gift box and handed one to each of the family.

Phillip opened the box to find a USC jersey with 'JoJo' on the back. "Awesome! Wow, thank you guys so much!"

Melody smiled. "You guys, this is so amazing. Really, thank you so much."

Logan smiled at her. "No thanks necessary. Helping out the brother of my girlfriend is a no-brainer."

Her eyes opened wide as he acknowledged their relationship in front of her family. Her face turned pink and she glanced up at her mother, who was smiling sweetly.

Phillip smiled at Logan. "Good job. I'm impressed."

Logan chuckled.

✝✝✝

Logan and Melody went to lunch before they headed to the stadium, but they didn't go alone. They went to the *Two Sisters Diner* for their party of ten. Logan and Melody, Gabe and Taylor, young Eric and Jordan and her siblings, Josie, age ten, and Jamie, age eight. They also invited the two Davis boys, Daniel age twelve, and Jeremy age eleven, so that Josie and Jamie would have someone closer to their age in the group.

They ran into some UCLA students at the diner and insults were thrown back and forth, but young Eric and Logan expertly detoured around an altercation. Gabe had been ready to brawl if necessary but was glad when cooler heads prevailed. Jordan and Taylor seemed to take it in stride. Melody however, was visibly upset.

"Hey," Logan said softly. "Everything is okay. See, no fight?"

She nodded, but her hands shook. "I thought for sure those guys were gonna

call you out."

"They did call us out," Gabe said with a laugh.

"But there's always a choice," Logan and young Eric said at the same time.

Young Eric nodded at the Davis boys. "So, if a brawl broke out, you guys woulda had our backs, right?"

"Of course," Daniel said calmly.

Jeremy nodded with a smile. "I was already thinkin' of ways to get 'em."

"Like what?" Gabe asked out of curiosity.

"Like, me gettin' down on all fours behind the big guy and you giving him a hard push backward."

Gabe smiled. "I like it." He grabbed a handful of fries and stuffed them in his mouth.

"Yeah, let's work that out together just in case for another day," Daniel said with a laugh.

"You got it," Gabe agreed.

"Well, anyway," Melody said, "good job on defusing the situation. I was so scared they were gonna fight with you."

Logan reached over and took her hand. "I got you, Melody."

She nodded. "I'm glad you do."

He raised her hand and gave it a quick kiss.

"So, are you two like, out?" Gabe asked with a grin.

Logan chuckled. "I think so, at least until she dumps me."

Taylor squealed in delight. "Oooh, that is so awesome!"

Melody blushed.

Jordan smiled at her. "We'll talk later."

"Oh no," Logan complained. "Don't go undermining me."

"I would never," Jordan said quickly.

Young Eric finished his drink. "Well, you guys hurry up and eat. I wanna get to the stadium and watch warmups."

"Me too," Gabe agreed. "Let's go."

✝✝✝

It was the most important game of the season and the stadium was packed. It was always packed, but today, it seemed more so than ever. College GameDay was not there, even though it was a big game. The show had gone to Ohio State because its game was also one of the most important games of the season. If #4 Ohio State lost and #5 USC won, USC would probably make it into the playoffs. First, they had to beat #6 UCLA. Both USC and UCLA were one loss teams. It was time to show out.

Melody looked around as they approached the seats the Kinos always held reserved. She smiled at her mother and father. They sat right next to Mark and Bella Adams, Logan's parents. Bella held Emily on her lap. On the other side of them sat Breez and Joey Adams. Their eldest, Sophia, had her own seat one row down right in front of her parents and right next to Angelina Kino. To Angelina's right were her four brothers, and then her parents. Currently, Joey Adams held his son Ledger on his lap, and Breez held Kelstyn, though she too

had her own seat.

Melody was not surprised to see Dr. Jeffy sitting beside her husband with her two-week-old son cuddled against her. Melody had heard Jeffy say to Cam that there was no way she was gonna miss her nephew's game, and there was no way she was gonna leave her son with a babysitter. Melody smiled and secretly hoped she'd be able to hold the baby sometime today.

Jordan's sister Josie sat on the other side of Sophia, ready to help Miss Shelley if she needed anything. Jordan's brother, Jamie, sat next to Jeff Davis with his two boys on the other side of him. Also in this group, were the Lee brothers and their wives. Agent Jensen Deal was also present and sat near Jeff Davis. Both of those men, Jensen and Jeff, had wives who were pregnant and due any day and neither woman felt up to attending the game. Logan led Melody up to the highest row. The only ones sitting in this row so far were Bree and Ricky Kino. Gabe and Taylor sat down next to them, then Logan and Melody and then young Eric and Jordan.

Mark pointed out Phillip in his wheelchair down on the field being pushed by Lyle along the sidelines. Every time a player would run by him, they'd high-five or fist-bump. They'd been told to not touch his head, which was covered with a cap. Mark took out a couple pairs of binoculars and passed them around so everyone could get a look at Phil. Logan handed a pair to Melody.

She looked through them and then handed them off to young Eric. Logan glanced down at her and she was frowning.

"What's the matter, Melody?"

She shook her head. "Nothing at all. It's just that his black eyes make him look pretty pitiful." She smiled. "But he's alive and getting better by the minute, so I'm grateful. And Logan, what you guys are doing for him today, I just can't thank you enough."

"Naw, it's really no big deal. I mean, we know the USC quarterback," he said with a laugh. "And he simply told his coach about this kid who plays football in high school who is a huge USC fan, and he stepped in to protect his sister's honor from some thug and almost died, and it would be nice to do this for him. It's not all one-sided. The coach feels like it will inspire the guys to fight hard in the game. So it's a win-win."

"Hey guys, goin' live," Taylor said quickly. "If ya don't want to be on camera raise your hand now."

"Try to keep the agents off camera," Joey said.

"Don't I always, Uncle Joey?"

He smiled at her. "You always try. Try harder."

"Yes, sir, Deputy Chief, sir," she said with a mock salute.

He pointed at her. "Taylor, you don't want to take me on."

She laughed. "Oh, but I do, Uncle Joey. I mean I really do. That would be loads of fun."

"For who?" young Eric said to his sister. "Not for you, Tay."

She made a face, turned her phone on herself and began to speak.

Melody watched as Taylor smiled and chattered away for her unseen audience. “She’s a natural on camera,” Melody said.

Logan nodded. “She should be.”

“She’s just so adorable,” Melody added. “I mean, like, she’s mesmerizing to watch. I’d stare at her all the time but I try not to only because I know it’s rude. I mean, she’s beyond beautiful. And her personality is so bright and shiny, she draws me like a magnet. And she’s smart. She speaks so freely and easily, she doesn’t get tongue-tied or anything when she’s speaking live to who knows how many people.”

Logan nodded. “I agree. She’s good. Tay, how many people are online right now, watching you live?”

She looked at the camera without missing a beat. “Eighteen thousand, but it’ll pick up as soon as I say what I’m about to say.” She smiled into the camera. “Yes, everyone, the person who asked that question is none other than Logan Adams and we’re gonna interview him in a few minutes. We’re also gonna interview Gabe, and I know that’s who you’re all looking for.” She turned the camera on Gabe.

“Hey everyone. It’s a great day, isn’t it? I’m having a blast at the USC game and it hasn’t even started yet!”

Taylor turned the camera back to herself. “We’re gonna wait a minute or two to talk to Gabe so other people can get online, so while we wait let’s say hello to the rest of the fam.”

She began to walk around to each person.

“Okay, now that you said you’re gonna interview Gabe, how many people are online?” Logan asked.

She looked at the phone and smiled. “Fifty-four thousand and growing.”

Melody giggled. “That is unreal. And she’s talking to all those people like it’s nothing.”

Logan nodded. “She’s a natural. If she wanted to pursue a career in front of the camera, she’d be an immediate star.”

Melody looked at Logan with a smile. “So, like, I heard she used to have a crush on you.”

He smiled. “Yeah, she did. That started before we were cousins and when she was young. Like, about eight or nine.”

“And then you got adopted into the family and it was over?”

“No. The fact that we were legal cousins didn’t stop her. She even cornered me once and made me promise to date her when she turned eighteen.”

“And did you promise?”

“I made the promise that if she still wanted to date me when she was eighteen, I would take her out to dinner. But I made that promise because I felt sure she would lose interest once she grew up a little.”

“So, you were never interested? I mean, not even a little?”

He shook his head. “Not really. I mean, don’t get me wrong. Taylor is a beautiful, smart, sweet, funny, amazing girl.”

Melody’s eyebrows rose.

"She's all the things that any guy would want— their sister or their cousin to be. But she and I weren't meant to be."

"How do you know that?"

"Because, you and I were meant to be," he said softly.

She looked down, then back up. "And you really think that?"

"I don't say things I don't mean, Mel."

She smiled. "Only my brothers ever call me that."

"It's a term of endearment, I hope you know. I won't call you that if you don't want me to."

"No, I think it's fine. I think I like it. It's not so formal."

He nodded. "But I'll still call you Melody too, because, well, you know, music is my thing."

She giggled and looked up to watch Taylor say 'hello' to young Eric and Jordan on her little interview.

"And here's my favorite brother, Eric, who I'm so proud of for winning the Kino Challenge a few weeks ago. He's totally the best big brother even though he can be annoying."

"Um, thanks, Taylor. Ya know, little sis, you can be a little annoying too."

"Yeah, but you still love me."

He nodded. "I concede that. And really, Tay, I'm proud of you too."

She kissed his cheek on camera. "And next to my brother is his totally awesome girlfriend whom I love like a sis, Jordan Brooks. Jordan, say hello!"

Jordan smiled at the camera. "Hey everyone. Go Trojans."

Young Eric smiled in approval.

"And here's one of the newest members of our family," Taylor said as she aimed the camera at Melody, whose eyes opened wide with surprise. "This is Melody. She's my awesome new friend. She helps take care of my grandparents' new children and she also happens to be dating my cousin. Melody, say hey to everyone."

Melody smiled. "Hello, everyone!"

"I think Melody is a little shy," Taylor put in. "Do you have anything else you'd like to say?"

Melody nodded. "Yes. I think that you, Taylor Kino, are just the cutest, sweetest girl there is and I'm honored to be considered your friend."

"Awww, now that was sweet, and I swear everyone, I did not pay her to say that!" Taylor pointed the camera at Logan.

"And of course, you all know Logan Adams, who is in the middle of writing and cutting his first album and hopefully it will be the first of many. We can't get enough of hearing him sing, and I have to say, when he took off on his guitar playing *"Johnny B. Goode"* at the wedding last week, us girls almost lost it. Logan, say hey to everyone."

"Hey everyone, hope you're all doing great. My focus today is on my brother, whom you all know is the USC quarterback. He's worked hard, his team has worked hard, so, let's win this game. Go Trojans. And if any of you watching right now are UCLA fans, or, like, Ohio State fans, no offense. I still

love you."

"Thanks, Logan," Taylor said. "And now finally, we're back to Gabe."

"How many are watching now?" Logan asked out of curiosity.

Taylor glanced at her phone. "Over two hundred thousand—now stop asking me that," Taylor said, making Logan laugh.

They watched as Taylor sat next to Gabe to have a longer interview with him. He usually prepared some insight he'd picked up during the week, or spoke to individuals who were struggling and had written in to him about what they were dealing with. He would try to address those issues for them. It was always good stuff. Many times he actually ran things by his father or Grandmaster Kino to see what he could do to help people. Gabe said he wanted a ministry, and he definitely had one, though he may not realize it yet.

Logan turned back to Melody. "Over two hundred thousand. I don't think those two know just how powerful they are. Ya know, we call social media people 'influencers.' Well, those two, they really are. They're influencing a whole generation of kids to have better priorities, to find God, to stop trying to hook up, to stay virgins, to serve others and to rise up and fight for right. I'm so proud of them. Heck, they're even teaching kids to speak better, to educate themselves. They are amazing."

"I agree. I'm honored to actually know them," Melody said. "And you. Do you realize that you too are an 'influencer' like them?"

"I'd like to be one day. My goal is to influence through my music. To teach and inspire through music."

"I totally believe that's what you'll do," Melody said softly.

He looked into her eyes. "You believing in me, that means a lot." He cupped her cheek and gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

Next to them, young Eric and Jordan smiled, then looked at each other. "Does that make you happy?" Jordan whispered.

Young Eric chuckled. "It actually does."

"Me too," she said with a sigh.

"The fact that it makes you happy too, also makes me happy," he said and quickly offered her a brief kiss too.

"It's kinda scary," Jordan said.

"What is?"

"This happy feeling. Like, it's too good to be true."

"Ya can't live in fear, Two-Three. Don't be afraid. Just enjoy it. Just know that I am so in love with you and we're gonna be so happy for a very long time. Got it?"

She nodded. "Got it."

They looked down at the field as the announcer began to speak. They then directed their eyes to the jumbotrons to see a close-up of Phil and hear a quick version of what happened to him, though no details that would mess up the case against Cade. The audience applauded his bravery, the fact that he had survived, and his continuing recovery. They moved on and finally it was time for the national anthem and the coin toss. USC won the toss and deferred.

Logan could feel it, things were gonna go great.

✝✝✝

The majority of the Kino family and friends were in great moods at halftime. JoJo was having a great game. Maybe the game of his life. He'd already thrown for three touchdowns, one a seventy-yard strike. He'd also scored one himself, from the twelve-yard line, when all of his receivers were covered. Icing on the cake, the defense had just scored, and USC gets the ball after halftime. Still, UCLA was no cupcake team and had also scored. But USC led at the half, 35-17. It was looking good.

Grandmaster Kino stayed calm. He didn't like to celebrate too early.

Jeffy was also calm as she nursed Elijah beneath a light blanket. She glanced over at Jeff. He was laughing and talking with his boys and Jamie. "Cam," she whispered. "I'm getting a strange feeling."

"Uh, oh," he said with a smile. "A disturbance in the force?"

She nodded. "Go ask Jeff if he's checked on Mickey lately."

Cam rose and went to speak with him. Jeff immediately pulled out his phone and called his wife. "Hi Mick, just callin' to check on you."

"I'm good. JoJo is doing great, huh?"

"Yes he is. So proud of that boy."

"Me too. Looks like they're gonna win."

"Well, there's another whole half to play, so let's just say it's lookin' good so far."

"Okay, we'll say that." She breathed heavily into the phone.

"What was that?"

"A contraction."

"How strong?"

"Not very."

"Do you think you're goin' into labor, because Jeffy had a bad feeling and wanted me to call you."

"Oh, so you only called me because *Jeffy* was worried about me?"

He laughed. "Yes. But I didn't call you earlier because I trust that if you need me you will call me."

She smiled. "I would. For now, I'm sitting here in a comfortable chair with my feet up, sipping herbal tea and getting a close up of the game in peace and quiet. So, I'm good."

He smiled. "Okay, then. I'm glad to hear it. I love you, Mick. I'm still feelin' it."

She smiled. "Me too. Oh, and I just got off the phone with Marissa and she and Chris are having a watch party and everyone is freakin' out. But, also, she thinks she might be in the early stages of labor."

"Cool." He sighed. "Mick, I know you wish you could be there with her."

"I do, but you promised once the babies are born we can visit each other."

"I promised and I won't go back on it. Jason already knows that both Chris and I are taking some time off after the babies are born."

"Okay. Well, I just heard someone ask what you want from the concession,

so I'll let you go. See ya soon."

"Bye, babe." Jeff ended the call, pocketed his phone, looked to Jeffy and gave her the thumbs up. This made Jeffy frown.

Jeff then pulled out his wallet. Gabe shook his head. "Nope, I got Mr. Kino's card and he said to pay for everyone."

Jeff put his wallet away and looked to the boys. "Tell Gabe what you want or go with him to help carry it."

"We'll go," Dan said. "Come on guys."

The three young boys went with Gabe and Taylor to the concession. Two of the ten agents surrounding the family went with them.

✝✝✝

The optimism that the Kino family had at the beginning of the third quarter was dimming. They got the ball first after the half. They got a first down with a run, got another first down with a pass, then stalled out and had to punt. The kick was shanked off the side of his foot and only went twenty-two yards. Things only got worse from there. Three plays later, UCLA broke one and scored. 35-24 was much more uncomfortable, and there was a definite shift in momentum for UCLA.

Next possession, the very first play, the center hiked the ball over JoJo's head. JoJo was able to run back and scoop it up but was taken down at the line of scrimmage. JoJo was slow to get up. One of his linemen pulled him to his feet. JoJo's teammates were screaming for a penalty for an illegal hit to the head. This started some pushing and shoving, but the refs ended it quickly.

Cameras panned and briefly put JoJo's famous family up on the jumbotron, their faces frowning with worry as they watched JoJo try to shake it off. The coach called a timeout.

Logan, young Eric and Gabe remained on their feet, watching JoJo closely. He seemed okay. He drank water, nodded his head at the coach as he spoke, put his hand on the center and looked to be encouraging him, or calming him down. "Come on, guys," Logan whispered.

Second down, began a march down field. Their running back broke for twenty yards. After that, JoJo picked 'em apart. But they stalled out at the thirty-yard line and had to settle for a field goal attempt. The kick was good, though just barely, which was not like their guy who'd missed only one attempt all year and his longest field goal was fifty-three yards. End of third, 38-24.

Fourth quarter, UCLA reached into a bag of tricks and came out with a halfback pass. They executed flawlessly and scored. 38-31.

UCLA kicked off to USC and the kickoff return got them all the way to the fifty. The very next possession, JoJo connected with the tight-end thirty yards downfield. It was a perfect strike, thrown between two defenders, hit the guy in stride and he scored. It was now 45-31. A little more breathing room.

The USC defense held UCLA on their next possession. Things were looking up. JoJo marched his team downfield again. A twenty-yard run. Two perfect strikes for first downs. Then he went back to his tight end, placed the

throw perfectly, it looked like it was gonna be another tight-end score, but this time a defender slammed the tight-end and he lost the ball. Fumble. The UCLA defensive end scooped the ball up and ran eighty-six yards. Score, 45-38.

USC's next possession began well enough with a twenty-yard run, and two passes that gained twelve yards and eighteen yards. On the UCLA twenty-yard line, JoJo's line broke down and he was sacked. Now they were on the twenty-eight-yard line. A run produced nothing, jammed up on the line of scrimmage. JoJo rifled a slant right in the numbers, but his receiver couldn't hold onto it. They went for the field goal, and the crowd was stunned when the kicker missed the forty-five-yard attempt. Still, 45-38.

JoJo's family watched him head to the sidelines. He showed no emotion. He went to the receiver who dropped the pass and spoke with him. Then went to the kicker and spoke with him. Both conversations, whatever was said, ended with head nods and pats on the shoulder.

JoJo took a seat on the sideline, caught his breath and watched the unthinkable happen. UCLA marched down the field and scored. Instead of going for two, they played it safe and kicked the extra point. 45-45.

USC got the ball back and produced nothing. UCLA got the ball back, and thankfully, also produced nothing, except a perfect punt that gave the ball back to USC on their own ten-yard line.

With only 1:30 left in the game, and two timeouts, JoJo took charge. He was looking sharp. He took them down the field on a couple of long outs, and then scrambled for another first down to their thirty-two-yard line where he took a hard hit. He bounced right back up. Time out. Thirty seconds left.

Next, JoJo hit a slant across the middle for eighteen yards, putting them at midfield. Still, they needed ten—or closer to fifteen more yards—to get into field goal range. Because the first down came inside the final two minutes, the clock stopped while chains were reset. The officials set the ball, and clock began running. USC hurried to the line without using its final time out.

As the defense lined up, JoJo spotted the safety creeping up on the line of scrimmage. If the safety blitzed, JoJo knew his wide receiver would be open on the backside post. He audibled to a play-action rollout to the right. Everyone is watching the play clock. JoJo claps his hands and the ball is barely snapped in time.

The clock is winding down, twelve seconds remaining. JoJo faked the handoff, rolled out right and looked back across the field over his left shoulder, saw his open man, planted his foot...

"He's open! He's open!" Logan screamed, pointing toward JoJo's receiver.

"Behind you!" Gabe shouted in panic, gripping the sides of his head.

The roar of the crowd was deafening.

JoJo planted his foot to throw back across the field to his left, but there's a blind spot when you lift the ball and pull it back near the helmet, and JoJo did not pick up on the strong-side linebacker blitzing as well. He didn't see him. But he could hear the footsteps of the linebacker coming at him. At the same time he sees his wide receiver streaking open behind the blitzing safety—

just like he knew he would. It flashed through his brain. *This is it. This is the moment this game will be won. I just need to get this pass off. Just need another second. One more second.*

His arm started forward, and pain exploded through his shoulder as though he'd been shot. The linebacker slammed into him like a locomotive. A collective groan rose from both sides of the stadium at the force of the hit. JoJo went airborne briefly, then landed hard on his back. His head snapped back, slamming forcefully against the ground, and the linebacker came down on top of JoJo.

The ball shot straight up into the air. For an instant it seemed to hang there supernaturally before it came down—into the arms of the UCLA safety.

The gasps and screams of the crowd scared all the children. Shelley immediately dropped down in front of them to put her arms around them and tell them everything was okay. Bella was doing the same for Em, and Breez for both Ledger and Kelstyn because Joey and Mark were currently on their feet, their mouths and eyes wide open.

The USC crowd watched in horror as the UCLA safety intercepted the ball and ran all—the—way.

Touchdown, UCLA.

Final score: 52-45.

The place went insane.

However, the Kino family and friends were quiet, watching intently. The linebacker who hit JoJo had scrambled up off him immediately and run down field to celebrate. However, JoJo was not getting up. His O-line went to him, were on their knees around him, trying to talk to him. He wasn't moving.

Security tried to keep the fans from storming the field. Cameras zeroed in on the fallen quarterback. He was still not moving. He seemed to be out cold.

"Mark?" Bella said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

He nodded. "I'm goin' down."

"Wait, I'm coming with you," Jeffy said as she started to hand the baby to her husband.

"Not without me you're not," Cam said.

"I'll take him," Melody immediately volunteered.

An Ameritech agent contacted stadium security as Mark, Cam and Jeffy hurried toward the tunnel. A security officer met them and escorted them to the field. Once the USC team physician recognized Jeffy and asked for her assistance, she was allowed to join the medical personnel attending JoJo. Mark and Cam stayed nearby.

Gabe was shaking his head. "I saw him coming in. It was full speed, man."

Logan looked through the binoculars and then handed them to young Eric. "He's still not moving."

Joey too was looking through some binoculars and pulled them away, his face grim.

He handed the glasses to Eric senior.

Finally, the stadium became quiet as they realized there was a serious

situation taking place. Both teams were on the field, on their knees.

JoJo was still on his back, now surrounded by medical personnel. The sports channels were showing replays of the hit. Showing JoJo's head snap back. The replays were put up on the jumbotron screen.

The family looked up to watch, wincing as they saw the hit from different angles. They continued watching, since the cameras were zeroed back in on JoJo in present time. Medical personnel stabilized JoJo's head and neck while they assessed his breathing and level of consciousness. Jeffy leaned in, read him quickly and gave her nod. They first removed his facemask to ensure access to his airway, then the medical team carefully removed his helmet and shoulder pads together and fitted him with a cervical collar.

As the family in the stands watched, they again saw their own faces on the screen briefly, then back to JoJo. Instead of a cart to take him off the field, they rolled an ambulance into the stadium. They secured JoJo to a transport stretcher, and began moving him to the ambulance.

Eric nodded at Ricky. Ricky spoke firmly, glancing around at the group. "Huddle up, please," he said softly. "Let's go down by Dad."

Gabe and Taylor, young Eric and Jordan, and Logan and Melody, who was very carefully carrying tiny Elijah, went down a few rows to be closer to the rest of the family.

The group huddled together, took hands and Eric senior prayed over the young man whom he and Shelley themselves raised for the first four years of his life. Because their eyes were closed, they didn't realize that television cameras were carrying the image of their prayer out to millions of viewers.

The family finished their prayer and looked up again to see what was happening. On the screen, they saw Jeffy leaning over JoJo, who was already secured to the transport stretcher. She placed her hand on his chest, and then her forehead to his. She pulled away and spoke to her husband and brother, then placed her head against JoJo's head again.

A minute later, Eric senior got a call. It was Cam. "He's alive, but he's still unconscious. He's definitely concussed. Jeffy read him and he has a severe AC-joint separation in his right shoulder and possible damage to the rotator cuff or labrum. He's out of commission. Finished for the season. They won't know the full extent of the injury until we see the imaging, though Jeffy is pretty sure of her impressions. Anyway, she's gonna reach in with her mind and bring him out of it."

Eric hung up from Cam and turned to speak to the family. They all looked to him expectantly, and for a brief second he felt the weight of all these people, all these people he loved, all these people who depended on him. And God too, was depending on him to take good care of these people, to teach them. Currently they were looking to him for good news, and he would give them some. He smiled kindly. "He's alive. He's still unconscious, but Jeffy is with him. She read him and suspects a severe separation in his throwing shoulder and possible damage to the tendons or cartilage. His season is over and we won't know about his future until the doctors complete the scans."

There were different reactions. Relief. Acceptance. Disappointment.

Eric smiled a knowing smile. “Find the gratitude real quick, everyone. JoJo is alive. That is what we know. We don’t yet know what this injury will mean for his future, and let’s not decide before Jeffy and the doctors do.”

They turned to watch on the large screen. Finally, Jeffy pulled away and everyone saw what they wanted to see, JoJo moved. He lifted a leg, and then put his hand to his head. There was a murmur in the crowd. The sports announcers were talking about him now moving and what a relief it was to see this fine young man, this talented young man simply move his arm or his leg.

Down on the gurney, JoJo grabbed at his shoulder and grimaced in pain. His eyes squeezed shut as the pain emanated out from his shoulder to his chest and back and neck.

Jeffy leaned close to his ear. “Hurting pretty bad, Jo?”

In answer, he merely grunted with the pain and gave a slight nod.

She placed her hands on him. “I can take the edge off a bit.”

The EMTs looked back and forth from one to the other as they watched this young, beautiful, famous doctor lay her hands on JoJo and a moment later, he blew out a relieved breath.

“Better,” she said.

He nodded. “Thanks. Where’s coach?”

“Right here, buddy.”

“What happened? Did we win?”

Everyone looked from one to another. The coach sighed. “Jo, linebacker hit you mid-throw. Ball went up in the air. Safety caught it. They scored.”

Again, JoJo’s hand went to his head and his eyes filled with tears. It took him a minute to get control of his emotions. “Sorry, Coach.”

“Jo, I shouldn’t have to teach you of all people about priorities. It’s a tough loss. You gave it your all. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I let the guys down.”

“Bull, you didn’t let anyone down. We win as a team and we lose as a team. There were missed blocks, missed field goals, dropped passes, bad snaps. Come on, now, Jo. I love ya, son. Your teammates love you. Just focus on healing right now.”

JoJo didn’t bother to wipe the tears from his cheeks. He nodded and looked up at the EMTs. “I’m dizzy, like I’m gonna pass out.”

“Let’s get you into the ambulance,” one encouraged.

The crowd began to applaud as they rolled the gurney toward the waiting ambulance. JoJo raised his good hand in the air and gave a thumbs up. The crowd then roared, whistles, shouts, loud applause from both sides.

Up in the stands, the family stood in a circle.

“Well, that’s an ending I didn’t see coming,” Justin said softly.

Eric’s lips pressed together. Earlier, at halftime when everyone else was so jovial, he’d felt an uneasiness, but didn’t say anything. This was a serious injury, but the family had survived much darker hours. He smiled at his friend. “Well now, Justin, this ending might not be as bad as it feels. Look at it this

way, no one has been kidnapped, or tortured, or is missing, or killed. No one has chosen to go to the dark side. JoJo is alive. This stings a bit is all."

"Yeah, but depending on how bad the shoulder injury is, it could be career ending," Joey said quietly.

"It could," Eric agreed. "To be honest, it already sounds like it is, but miracles happen all the time as you all know very well. This could be something he heals from completely. What we should not do is decide JoJo's future while he's still being loaded into an ambulance." Eric smiled up at Logan and young Eric, and then shifted his gaze to David and Carol Keith, and Phillip and Lyle, Taylor and Gabe, Melody and lastly Jordan, who also might be dealing with a college career ending injury. "You guys know that God has a plan for our lives, right? And when a door closes, a window opens. Trust Him. These little tests of faith, when you feel like all is lost, they help us to put things in perspective. They make us stronger.

"So, how are we gonna handle this loss— or the possibility that JoJo may not be able to continue playing? We will pick up this cross and carry it gladly. With a happy countenance. We don't have to pretend it doesn't hurt. Faith isn't the absence of disappointment. Faith is trusting God while we're disappointed.

"Now, I'm sure you know that the world is watching to see how our family responds. Do we cave in despair over a lost game—or even a lost career? Do we trust God? His plans for us may differ from the path we thought we'd take. I think as long as JoJo continues seeking God's will, God will guide him to an amazing life. I trust God, that things will work out for JoJo just the way they're supposed to work out. Because you know, as long as we seek to do God's will, then we will continue to feel happy and fulfilled in this earthly life."

"So," Phillip asked. "You're saying that God's will maybe wasn't for JoJo to play pro?"

"Well, no one knows that yet— not even JoJo. But yes, that's what I'm saying. We all make plans for our lives when we're young. But the plans we make sometimes are not the plans God has, and so, we adjust."

"But JoJo has been so inspirational to so many people, especially young kids like me," Phillip went on. "How could that not be part of God's plan?"

Grandmaster Kino nodded with a smile. "That is a great question, Phillip. The answer lies in the wording of your question. '*Part* of God's plan.' Maybe it *was* part of God's plan to have JoJo inspire boys and young men like yourself up until this moment, and maybe now his path changes. He makes a turn. It will be interesting to see where God will lead JoJo next. Let's not second guess the plan."

"Your faith is amazing," David Keith said reverently.

"Thank you, but I don't know about that," Eric said humbly. "I'm a work in progress. But I heard the whisperings of the Spirit a few minutes ago, and knew I had to buck up and help my family through this heartache. And there's only one way to get through a heartache, any heartache, and that is to remember that God is real– and He is with us– and He has a plan– and He wants only the best for us. So, maybe, pro football was not the best for JoJo."

Young Eric nodded his head in understanding. He didn't speak up and say what JoJo had recently disclosed to him and Logan and Gabe. JoJo confided in them that he was close to being done. He'd said that he felt like he was just going through the motions. He felt like there was more out there for him to be doing. Something more important than playing football. He'd added that he wasn't certain about how he was feeling. He was just feeling torn between the love of the game, loyalty to his teammates and his school and doing something more. He'd said his entire life revolved around football, and the game taking up his Sundays wasn't vibing with what he saw himself doing. He'd always seen himself with a wife and kids, going to church on Sunday, not away playing ball. He saw himself worshiping God together with his family and friends. Having Sunday dinner together with his family. Even this year he'd felt like he'd missed out on so much family time.

Young Eric glanced up at Logan and Gabe and knew they were thinking about the same conversation. He smiled. "Granddad," young Eric said. "I think you are exactly right and I can't wait to see what God has in store for JoJo. I mean, really, it's pretty exciting. What does God have planned for him? It must be awesome."

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "It *is* pretty exciting. What does He have planned for JoJo? For that matter, what does He have planned for you? What does he have planned for Logan? And Gabe?"

He turned to look at Phillip and Lyle. "And I'm really excited to see what He has planned for you two. I mean, when God brings someone into our family like He has your family, it's always fun to find out what God has planned."

He looked at Melody. "He's already blessed our family so much with Melody, in more ways than one," he said as he smiled at Logan.

Logan smiled and touched Melody's cheek. She smiled up at him.

Grandmaster Kino went on. "Earlier this year God blessed our family with Jordan and her family. And we know God is blessing Jordan's mom with a new adventure in her life as she's working on opening her own restaurant and moving from a life of struggle to one of abundance. Not that material abundance is important. It's not. And it doesn't prove God's favor just like hardship doesn't mean that God has abandoned someone. Some people are actually meant to live a life of poverty to show others how as long as you're doing God's will, you can be happy. It's their actual calling. There is a plan, as I have said many times. God calls us to be faithful with whatever we have, whether it's a little or a lot."

"And just look at Jordan. She's been through a lot. In the short time we've known her, she's come to Christ, she's put a dangerous criminal behind bars, she's freed her mother and siblings from another criminal, and she's become extremely strong emotionally. God has honed her."

"And she's brought your grandson a lot of happiness too," young Eric put in, making everyone laugh.

Grandmaster Kino smiled. "That she has. She's brought all of us joy. Ricky and Bree love her like a daughter. Taylor loves her like a sister. Young Josie

and Jamie are showing that they are gonna be some of God's strongest warriors. And this is just one family. Now we have the Keith family and I'm so interested to see what amazing things come of them."

At that moment Jeff pulled out his phone. "Hey Mick."

"Hi Jeff. So, is JoJo okay?"

"Yes, he's gonna be fine."

"Put me on speaker."

Jeff looked up at the group. "My wife wants to speak to you all." He put his phone on speaker and held it up.

"I saw you all pray on TV. The announcers were so touched by what they saw. They said, 'that Kino-Adams bunch—they're the real deal.' I was so proud of how you all handled it. And then they talked a bit about Jeffy and the different foundations and humanitarian work.

"I mean, I don't know if the announcers were allowed to say everything they said, but it was like a giant testimony and I'm sure Satan was pretty mad that so much light came from JoJo getting knocked out at a football game. It was amazing. So I just wanted to call and let you know that the world is watching— and your light is shining so bright. And then I wanted to tell you one more thing."

"What's that babe?" Jeff replied.

"I'm at fifteen minutes apart and they're getting stronger."

The group gasped.

"So, I'm thinking you might wanna come on home," Mickey said lightly. "I think we're gonna have a baby tonight."

Jeff's face paled. "Mick, have you called the doctor?"

"Yes. She wants me to go on in to get checked."

"You're not driving yourself. Stay calm. I'm on my way."

"Of course I'm not driving myself. Our neighbor is taking me."

"Which one?"

"Joyce."

Jeff nodded. "Okay, good. Okay. I'm on my way. Stay calm. I'm coming."

She giggled. "I am calm. I'm thinking you need to stay calm, Division Chief Jefferson Davis."

He smiled. He knew she was saying that to remind him of how calm and professional he usually is on his job.

Bree and Ricky both laughed.

"We'll keep the boys with us," Bree assured Mickey.

Ricky nodded. "And I think I'll go with Jeff, just because it's easier to be with him than to worry about him."

"Fine," Jeff conceded and looked down at his boys with a smile. "Mom's about to have the baby. You guys behave at the Kinos."

"We will."

"Uh, Jeff, I'm hanging up now. See you soon," Mickey said.

"Oh, yes, baby, I'll be there soon. I love you, Mick."

"Love you too."

✝✝✝

Psalm 107:21

“Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wondrous works to the children of man!”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

November 24th, 12:30 PM, Sunday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

The older teens and young adults sat around two of the large circular tables on the deck behind the giant Kino Estate. The group included young Eric and Jordan, Gabe and Taylor, Logan and Melody, Phillip and Lyle, and JoJo whose injured arm was secured in a sling.

They'd casually been discussing the game, going over that last play from everyone's different perspectives.

"I'm just so glad you were okay," Taylor finally said.

JoJo smiled at his beautiful cousin. "Thanks Tay. I'm still not okay, but at least I'm alive."

Gabe patted Taylor's head. "She cried over you last night, JoJo."

"Gabriel Tanner," Taylor said quickly. "You're not supposed to tell people my secrets."

He laughed. "Sorry, Tay. It's just that I thought it was sweet how much you love your cousin."

"She does love her cousins," JoJo said, a gleam in his eye.

Taylor's mouth opened in surprise that he would make reference to her old crush on Logan. "Well now you're just being mean," Taylor said, her face turning pink.

Young Eric nodded. "I agree, JoJo. That was mean," he offered in defense of his little sister.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Don't know what I was thinking."

"Maybe you're just jealous because you're the only one without a girlfriend," Taylor retorted.

Now JoJo's mouth fell open. "Wow. Okay. You got me back." He looked around at everyone. "Tell me that wasn't also mean."

"It was," Logan said.

"Well, you're not the only one without a girlfriend," Phillip put in quickly.

"Thanks, Phil," JoJo said with a grin. "Now that football season is over, I guess we need to step up our game."

"It's not over," Phil said. "I mean, you'll still probably have the Rose Bowl game, right?"

JoJo frowned. "Okay, guys, let's get down to it. Doctors and Aunt Jeffy say I have a Grade V AC-joint separation in my throwing shoulder. On top of that, I have a full-thickness rotator-cuff tear and damage to the labrum. It is a severe injury. They think surgery is probably my best option, and even with surgery,

nobody can promise that I'll ever throw at a professional level. So, I may have surgery when we get back from Georgia. My brain scans were clear, and Aunt Jeffy says I can make the trip tomorrow as long as my concussion symptoms don't get worse. So then, when we get back from Georgia, I'll probably have the surgery. But after talking it over with my parents and praying about it, I've decided I'm not gonna chase the draft or spend another year trying to prove that I can still play. My season is over, so more than likely, I'm done. I won't be healed in time to play on New Year's Day. And with this type of injury, I probably won't get drafted. So, I'm done and so is my football career. I'm sorry, guys. I hope that doesn't disappoint you too much."

"Disappoint us?" young Eric said. "Jo, the only thing we're concerned about is how you're feeling about all this. If you're okay, then we're okay. So, tell us where your mind is at."

He nodded. "I already told you and Logan. I was feeling burned out. Very tired. The game was losing its luster. I mean, really, I wasn't even excited about probably goin' pro. That should say it all. My whole life has been about football since I was in middle school, actually even before in rec football. There's so much more that I want to do. I don't care about being famous or making millions. I feel like I can do better than that."

Young Eric nodded. "I get ya."

JoJo smiled at his cousin/brother. "I mean, Eric, look at you. You're younger than me and you, my bruh, are about to take the world by storm. Lots of people, young kids, they're looking up to you. They want to train hard and be strong like you. They listen to what you say and try to be better people. You are training God's warriors."

"I'm not sure where I want to go from here, Jo, you know that. But it's a start," young Eric added.

"Well, you have a great start in making a difference in the world. And then look at Logan. He's younger than both of us, and he's well on his way to being a huge star."

"Being a huge star is not what's important to me," Logan put in.

"Right. I know that. It's your music and the messages in your music. Which is so commendable, Logan. And it's not a fluke. You're good."

Melody nodded with a smile because he was good. Really good. And he deserved every blessing.

JoJo nodded at his brother Gabe. "And look at this young guy who puts us all to shame."

Gabe looked around to see who he was talking about. His eyes opened wide. "Me?"

"Gabe, the ministry you've started, you are changing the lives of young people in this country."

"Well, I'm trying to do what Agent Adams said. I'm trying to do something good with the opportunities God is giving me. And let me just say right now, that Taylor and I are working together on this. She's working just as hard, making videos, preachin' it up, all the while she's in school and now in dance

class."

Taylor smiled up at Gabe. "Thanks, Gabe."

"I call it like I see it." He looked back at JoJo. "So, no pressure, JoJo, I'm just interested. What is it you have in mind to do, if not playing football?"

"Good question, Gabe." He shook his head and sighed. "I want to serve God. I think He wants me to work with the kids coming up behind me. I mean, I'd have the chance to be a big influence on kids if I went pro, but not the time."

"Whaddya mean?" Jordan asked.

"I mean, going pro would give me the attention of a lot of kids, but I'd be so taken up in football, there wouldn't be enough time left to truly give them the amount of time I think they need. I mean, a few personal appearances, here and there, that's not enough. I feel like I need to spend a lot of time, like, every single day, working with kids."

"Like a teacher?" Melody asked.

He nodded but made a face. "Yes, but no."

"Like a coach?" young Eric asked.

"Yes, but no, because I'd only be around the kids at one school."

"Unless you run your own coaching facility," Gabe put in.

JoJo nodded. "That's closer to what I'm thinking of, but not quite. I'm gonna keep praying about what form it should take. I know I want to work with young people. I just don't know exactly what God wants that work to look like yet. I also need to see how my shoulder heals." He looked around at some of the best people he knew. "You guys pray for me too," he said.

"We got that covered," Gabe said quickly.

They turned to greet Josie as she and the Davis boys approached the group.

"Hey, Josie," Jordan said. "You okay?"

Josie nodded. "Yes, but Mrs. Kino asked us to get some of you guys to help take the little ones out on the tramp."

Daniel Davis smiled. "Yeah, I told her me and Jerm could handle it, but they want you to be there too because there are too many."

Melody stood. "I'll go do it."

"I'll help you," Logan said immediately.

"Let's all go to the tramp," JoJo suggested. "Me and Phil will supervise, challenge and judge."

Gabe grinned. "Judge? So, this is gonna be a competition?"

"Why, you gotta problem with that?" young Eric asked as he rose.

"You know I got no problem with that whatsoever."

JoJo nodded. "That's what I thought." He stood. "Someone grab chairs for me and Phil and Jordan and the rest grab the kids and let's go."

"So pushy," Logan said.

"He's used to bossing people around on the field," young Eric said.

Logan nodded. "Yeah, except he's being pretty bold right now since he only has one arm."

JoJo laughed. "I'll take ya with one hand tied behind my back."

Everyone laughed at that.

"Why are you still sitting?" JoJo asked. "Move it people."

"Wow, JoJo, who made you boss?" Taylor said.

Gabe smiled. "Well, he is the oldest, I mean, of us kids."

"Yeah I am," he said proudly.

"But not when we get out to Georgia," young Eric said as he grabbed two chairs and Logan grabbed two chairs. Gabe rose and put his hand on Lyle's shoulder. "Come on, Lyle, help me with the kids."

Gabe and Lyle, Melody, Taylor, Dan, Jeremy and Josie headed inside to round up all the children.

"Who wants a piggyback ride?" Gabe asked when he got inside.

"I do!" Noah said immediately.

Gabe knelt down and let Noah climb up on his back.

Melody smiled and immediately knew there was about to be a problem.

"Angelina, I'll take you on my back," she said quickly. "Dan, you take Abe. Jeremy gets Manny. Taylor you get Em, and Josie, you can get Kelstyn, right? And Lyle, you get Ledger. Hmm, that leaves Nate and Sophia and Jamie."

"I wanna ride on Three," Nate said with a pout.

"And me and Sophia can walk," Jamie said. "I mean, I'm eight."

"You *are* awfully grown up," Melody said. "Good, you and Sophia head down and tell young Eric to come get Nate." She knelt down. "Let's go Angelface."

The piggyback train headed out, Melody in the lead and ending with Gabe. They passed young Eric as he dashed in to get Nate.

Down at the tramp, Phillip was exclaiming over the apparatus. It was not your usual large, circular family trampoline. It was a rectangular, professional-grade trampoline recessed slightly into the lawn, surrounded completely by a sand pit and the frame was covered in thick safety padding. The setup was off toward the right side of the backyard area on the second tier where there was a small lawn. There was no safety net enclosure and Phil asked about that.

JoJo grinned. "I suppose they'd have that if they ever wanted to say, 'Okay, kids, go play on the trampoline by yourselves.' But that doesn't happen. I mean, we're a family of athletes and we always press the limits, so, we practice safety, but we don't need netting when we have a bunch of very capable adults around to supervise, instruct, teach, and dive for falling babies."

Phillip laughed.

Logan was currently jumping on the trampoline and going incredibly high. The kids' mouths dropped open as they watched him. He alternated between double fronts and double backs. Once everyone arrived, he landed, steadied himself and hopped off.

"Okay, listen up, kiddos. Here are the rules," JoJo said loudly. "One jumper at a time. No fighting, no arguing, no one gets on without grown ups surrounding the entire tramp. No tricks unless young Eric, Logan, or Taylor says you're ready to do them. Aaaaannnd—no giving up. You can do it! But THE most important rule is—what I say goes." He looked around. "Noah, you

get to go first."

Gabe nodded with a smile and set Noah on the tramp but he froze, so Gabe stood right beside him and held his hands for a few bounces.

Noah jumped a few times and then JoJo started bossing. "Okay. Each person, let me see if you can bounce ten times without falling down. Gabe, show them what I mean."

Gabe saluted and removed Noah from the trampoline. "Everyone count."

They all counted to ten as Gabe jumped. He showed them how to stop. He got off and lifted Ledger onto the tramp because he had some experience. "Okay, Ledge, ready, go!"

They counted ten times for him, but he tried to keep going and Gabe wrestled him down and tossed him over to young Eric as Ledger laughed. Em was next, then Nate, Kelstyn, Angelina, Manny and Abe each took a turn. Sophia, who was practically an expert, and Jamie each got to go to twenty bounces and also performed a few tricks. When all the little ones had a turn jumping, then JoJo gave them one trick to do. A sit bounce. He gave Sophia and Jamie a tuck front flip. When they'd all accomplished that, JoJo decided to do an experiment. He announced a timed two-minute free-for-all, letting the children jump together while the older ones stood as spotters. This caused gales of laughter. Then one collision, when Manny's head hit Em's nose, caused tears, but fortunately, no blood. And that was the end of the experiment. He then returned to one jumper at a time, giving everyone a chance to practice what they'd learned, which brought about much satisfaction as the children tried their new tricks.

Next, everyone was ordered off the trampoline while Josie and Jamie were given some more grown-up tricks to try.

Then Dan and Jeremy Davis showed out and then Lyle got on and he was coached through a few flips and twists.

Young Eric gave a demonstration because Nate begged him. He was impressive. When he finished, he pointed at Taylor. "You wanna see some real pro kinda stuff. You need to see Taylor. She's been working for years on her skills. Come on, Tay, show us what you got."

She hopped on. She jumped several times, very high, and then started doing double flips, front and back, pike and tuck. Flips with twists, a triple back. Layouts. She was mesmerizing. Gabe's mouth dropped open. He'd never seen Taylor perform like this. She was always so humble about her abilities. Still, after seeing how easily she'd picked up volleyball, he should have known she was capable of something like this.

"Tay, that was freakin' amazing," Gabe said when she finished.

She smiled as she walked to the edge of the trampoline and looked down at him. He held his arms out to her and she jumped down to land in front of him. "So, I surprised ya, huh?"

"Uh, yeah, ya did. You were amazing." He leaned close to her ear. "And Tay, that is hot."

She giggled. "You think everything is hot."

"When it comes to you, yeah." He leaned forward and kissed her.

"Guys, there are kids present," Logan said.

"That's never mattered to them," Jordan put in, causing giggles.

One of the little ones said, "Eeewww," and Taylor looked up. "Who said that," she demanded. "Was that you, Abe?"

He grinned and nodded. "Oh yeah, well, then I'm gonna kiss you!"

He laughed and tried to run, but she chased him down and kissed his cheeks several times making big smacking sounds.

That caused a huge ruckus of little boys trying to get Taylor to kiss them by telling her she'd better not kiss them. Taylor ran around trying to kiss all the kids. Gabe watched the scene with pure love and adoration in his eyes. He wanted that beautiful, young, high school senior to be the mother of his children. She was so vivacious. So filled with light. He was taken out of his daydream by young Eric placing a hand on his shoulder.

"My sister is something, huh?"

Gabe smiled and nodded. "She is."

"You love her a lot, don't ya?"

"I've never been secret about that," Gabe said.

"I know you said you're gonna wait for her. I hope nothing changes."

Gabe pulled his eyes away from Taylor and looked at her brother. "Whaddya mean?"

"I just mean that, I really want the two of you to make it. I think you're the best guy for her. I think she's awesome. I hope you don't fall out of love."

"How could I? I told Jesus I wanted to marry her. At least, I think I did."

"Whaddya mean, you think you did?"

He smiled. "I can't remember exactly everything I said. I may have said that *she* wants to marry *me*. Either way, as far as I'm concerned, it's a done deal."

"Good. And I hope she's not too young to know what she wants, because right now, she wants you."

Gabe smiled. "I know, and that's good to hear from someone else."

"I just hope she doesn't change."

"I hope so too, cuz I don't know what I'd do without her."

JoJo's phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket and placed it to his ear. "Hey, Grandma.... yes, ma'am.... fifteen minutes, got it." He put his phone away. "Okay everyone, lunch is almost ready and we have to head inside in fifteen minutes, so ya better get to jumpin'!"

Logan lifted Ledger high in the air. "And ya know what happens after lunch, right Ledger?"

The boy laughed. "It's my birthday party. And I get to have cake, as much as I want."

"Oh, ya think so, huh?"

"Yes," he said with a giggle and a twinkle in his eye.

"Well if you eat all the cake I think I'm not gonna give you the present I brought for you," Taylor teased.

Ledger laughed. It didn't seem to faze him a bit.

"How old are you, Ledge?" Melody asked. Not because she didn't know, but because she wanted to see if he remembered.

He frowned and held up two fingers.

She nodded. "You used to be two. But how old are you now that you're having your birthday?"

He concentrated and added another finger.

She smiled. "That's right!"

"I love birthday cake," Angelina suddenly proclaimed.

"Me too," Gabe said. "Love it, love it, love it," he said as he tickled her.

"Me too," Jamie yelled as he jumped high.

Young Eric looked over at Jordan and took her hand. "You okay, babe?"

She nodded.

"You seem to be down."

"Oh, I'm not. Just wishing I could play, you know, jump around and have fun with all the kids."

"It won't be much longer. A few more weeks and that cast will be off."

She sighed. "And then what? I mean, will I be able to rehab my foot and leg in time for softball? I mean, this is gonna sound really silly, but I wanted you to see me play. I wanted to make you proud of me the way I was so impressed by you and what you did in the Challenge."

He stood, carefully slipped one arm behind her back and the other beneath her knees. Then he lifted her into his arms, making her gasp in surprise.

"Don't you drop me," she giggled.

"Oh, wow, what an insult."

She laughed. "Three, what are you doing?"

"I'm reminding you that I'm already proud of you. Now kiss me."

She did.

"So, really, Jordan, I'm going to see you play. I'm gonna help you rehab, and so is Aunt Jeffy. And, girl, you are gonna be better than ever."

"Do you really think so?"

"I really do, baby. I really do. Now, hold onto your crutches. I'm gonna carry you up to the house."

"Three, you don't have to do that."

"I may not have to, but I want to. Hold on tight. I might even run."

She shrieked as he took off.

✞✞✞

Psalm 108:1-3

"My heart is steadfast, O God!
I will sing and make melody
with all my being!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will awake the dawn!
I will give thanks to you,
O Lord, among the peoples;
I will sing praises to you among the nations."

Chapter Thirty

November 24th, Sunday Afternoon
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Meanwhile, inside, the adults were having their own conversations. Sitting around the kitchen table, Jeffy was nursing little Elijah, who was hidden under the receiving blanket on Jeffy's shoulder. The baby was already nicknamed Eli. Next to Jeffy, Kimmie was complaining that her little baby boy was never gonna come out, while Cam spoke to Jensen about when he and Jeffy were in Africa just a few years earlier.

Also in the kitchen were Jewell Perez and Shelley, though Jewell was telling Shelley to go sit down. Jewell insisted that all of the entrees were either in one of the two ovens, the crock pots were simmering, the side dishes were all ready and she was just making up a few sauces. The buffet was already set up. They were feeding about forty people and everything would be ready soon, and when it was she would get help to set it all out. "Now go rest," Jewell insisted.

Shelley headed out to the living room where everyone else sat talking and went to where her husband sat in his wingback chair and took a seat on his lap.

"Well hello there," he said with a smile as she leaned in and briefly kissed her husband's lips.

She smiled. "Hey. Jewell has officially thrown me out of my own kitchen."

"And you're complaining?"

"Nope. Just explaining."

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Shelley girl."

She grinned. "I wasn't explaining to *you*."

The group of people laughed.

"So, what time is your flight out tomorrow?" David Keith asked.

"The flight leaves at 8:00 AM," Ricky offered.

"Oh, so you'll have to be at the airport by 6:00?"

"By seven. We're going on an Ameritech jet, so different airport."

"Oh! Do you always fly with Ameritech?"

"No. But whenever we can hitch a ride, we do."

David looked over at Jason. "Well that is very nice of you."

Jason smiled. "No it's not. They pay for the cost and if not for Grandmaster Kino, there wouldn't be an Ameritech, so, he allows me to show my gratitude every once in a while by giving him or his family a ride. No big deal."

Mark smiled at the Keiths. "So, tell me what is your family doing for Thanksgiving? Do you have other family?"

Carol nodded. "I have a sister who usually joins us, with her husband and two kids. And David's parents always come too."

"Oh, so, you'll have a houseful!" Bella said.

Carol smiled. "Well, that's what I thought, until I came here today. I mean, I'll have eleven people. I was trying to count everyone here today, and there's like, forty people here."

"And there would be two more if Mickey and Jeff were here."

"Speaking of Mickey and Jeff, what's the latest?" Angel asked.

"I just spoke to Jeff about thirty minutes ago," Bree said. "She's still in labor. The baby was posterior, but they were able to rotate her, so they're hoping things will go much faster now. They're talking about a possible C-section, but of course Mickey would like to avoid that if possible. Her blood pressure dropped a few times, but she and the baby are stable right now."

"Gosh, she's been in labor now about eighteen hours, hasn't she? I mean, that can't be good," Angel said.

Shelley smiled. "Jeffy says she's okay and the baby is coming soon."

Angel nodded. "Okay, then. I guess I won't worry."

"So, will the Davises be all alone for Thanksgiving then, since you're all going off?" Carol asked.

"No, assuming all goes well today, they're gonna drive to visit Jeff's parents. They always have Thanksgiving with Jeff's parents," Ricky said.

"And you are going out to have Thanksgiving with Gabe's family, right?" David asked.

"Not exactly," Joey answered. "We're going out to have Thanksgiving at Gabe's community center in Pine Forest, Georgia. Only we're gonna be the ones serving it."

Mark smiled at the look of confusion. "Gabe's community center, which is run by Gabe's sister Rose, is bussing in people from all around the county and surrounding counties and their goal is to feed at least five thousand, ya know, like in the Bible, when Jesus feeds the five thousand."

"Oh!" Carol said. "Well, that's quite an undertaking!"

Grandmaster Kino nodded. "It is. And when they invited our family to forgo our usual Thanksgiving and come and help, it sounded to us like a really fun and wonderful thing to do and we were very grateful to be invited."

"How in the world are you gonna make that happen?" David asked. "I can't wrap my mind around how to even get started on something like that."

Eric nodded. "Rose has a lot of people around her who are used to putting together large meals, but she's actually doing it by faith."

"By faith?"

Eric nodded. "She's taking the first steps without really knowing exactly how it's all going to come together. It's a great way to test and build our faith. She's showing trust in God. First, she felt like God was whispering to her to do this. Then she decided to accept the challenge. Then she prayed and asked God where to even begin, and that very morning the Mayor of Pine Forest stopped into the center to see how it was going and if there was anything he

could do for them, especially with the holidays approaching. She told the Mayor what she felt God was telling her to do, and the Mayor immediately got started with permits, and volunteers and retired school bus drivers."

"Retired drivers?"

"Yes, because they don't have that many people in Pine County who are homeless or in need of help so they'd have to reach out to other counties and to do that, they would need to transport them. Then there were legal issues and extra insurance, and extra needed facilities, which ended up being a giant tent."

Breez grinned. "Like the Tabernacle!"

Joey nodded at his wife.

"And then, after her talk with the Mayor, she asked God to show her the next thing she needed to do, and when she woke up the next morning she clicked on something in her email that was an advertisement for a class at the local college that was teaching about catering large events."

"So, she took a class on catering?"

"No," Eric went on. "She met with the school and the teacher and in exchange for allowing students to work hands-on, and also in exchange for huge free nationwide publicity for the college, they are teaching her step by step what she has to do, and helping her to accomplish each step."

"Okay, that is amazing."

"Right?" Shelley said. "And some people would think those things were just a coincidence, but there is no such thing as a coincidence. So, the test is, do we acknowledge God's hand and His messages? If we deny them, then He will eventually stop speaking to us. But if we can show just the tiniest bit of faith, then He will speak to us, show us things, teach us, and a real relationship begins to develop."

Eric nodded and smiled at his wife. "And now, I'm told that they have it all planned out and just need bodies to do all of the things. So, we're gonna go provide a few of those bodies."

"What are you assigned to do?" David asked.

Eric smiled. "Well, I don't know yet, but whatever it is I'll give it my all and I'm sure my family will give it their all, and I'll use this time to teach my little ones how fulfilling it is to serve others."

"What if you get assigned to clean up?"

"Then that place will be cleaner than it's ever been," Justin put in.

David turned to him. "Are you and your wife going too?"

Justin shook his head. "No, my wife and I have been invited over to my brother's home for Thanksgiving. My niece Kimmie is due anytime now, so we're gonna hang out here."

"Who knows, David," Eric went on. "If this turns into a yearly thing, maybe your family can come with us next year?"

David nodded. "Well now, that would be a great goal. But before we get ahead of ourselves though, I guess we should see if Melody and Logan are still together by then."

Eric shrugged. "If they're not, they will acknowledge that it wasn't meant

to be, thank each other for the time they spent together, and move on as friends. At least ideally, that's how it should be when kids are dating. Either way, we don't discard friends, and we consider you and your family friends."

"Yep," Jason said quickly. "Once you've been adopted into the Kino family, they will rarely let go of you. You'd have to do something pretty bad to have that happen."

David laughed. "I didn't realize we'd been adopted."

"People rarely do," Justin answered. "They don't realize it's happening until after the fact. Suddenly, they find they have this giant group of very influential people covering their six."

"What Justin means is," Eric began. "We're friends, and if you ever need anything, help with anything at all, feel free to call on us. With God's help, there isn't much that we can't figure out a solution to."

They looked up as they heard a loud cheer coming from the backyard. Shelley listened carefully. She smiled. "Well, it sounds like laughter and not crying so I think they're okay."

"Someone must've done a great trick on the trampoline," Joey said.

Jewell came into the room. "Okay, Miss Shelley, I promised to tell you when things were ready, and, we're ready."

Shelley stood. "Okay, men, as much as I know you want to come help, it will be too crowded in the kitchen, so, ladies, come help us put everything out, buffet style, and guys, go gather the munchkins from the trampoline."

They all stood to do as ordered when Bree's phone rang.

"Wait a minute," Bree said as she answered her phone. "Hey Jeff! Give me some good news." She put the phone on speaker. "And I have you on speaker so don't say anything ugly about Ricky."

Jeff laughed. "Hello, everyone. I just thought I would let you greet the father of a seven-pound, eight-ounce, baby girl with a head full of dark hair."

The room erupted with cheers and hoots and hollers.

"Hey you guys, you should see her, I mean, she is so beautiful." Jeff's voice choked with emotion.

"I'm sure she is," Bree said. "And how is Mickey?"

"She is awesome, and relieved and very, very tired."

"I bet."

"So, I just spoke to Dan and Jeremy," Jeff said.

"Oh, that must've been the big scream we heard from the backyard."

He laughed. "Yep. And I told them to go ahead and eat and I'll come to get them in about an hour or so."

"You stay with Mickey," Ricky said. "After we eat I'll bring the boys to you. And I have a feeling my wife will want to come along."

"You're right about that," Bree said.

"Okay, Rick, that would be great. Thanks so much. We are kinda tired."

"And hungry, I bet. I'll pack you and Mickey up some of this good wholesome food and some raw milk for Mickey and bring it up."

"Wow. Again, that would be great. Thanks so much."

"It'll be our pleasure. And Bree and Jewell, and Bella and Breez have already made you guys a week's worth of meals, so, we'll go ahead and take those to your house."

"Good grief, Rick, any other blessings you guys wanna lay on me?"

"Absolutely. But we'll do that in person. See ya soon."

Bree ended the call and smiled at everyone. "Let's eat!"

✝✝✝

November 24th, 6:00 PM, Still Sunday Early Evening

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

"I didn't realize that walking on the beach at night was so romantic," Melody said as she squeezed the strong hand that held hers.

Logan smiled and brought her hand up to his lips and placed a soft kiss on her knuckles. He glanced up to make sure the house was no longer in view because he wanted privacy. He stopped, turned and faced the ocean. "There's a power here," he said softly. "I can't really put it into words, but I'm trying to in a song I've been writing. A lot of songs have been written about the sea, the waves, the ebb and flow, the connection of sea to land and of us to God. I'm struggling with putting what I feel into words."

She looked up at him. "The words you just said. They describe this feeling. Like, the feeling that there is power here, so much so that it's impossible to describe, but you still feel that it connects you to God. I mean, the fact that you feel you can't put it into words actually says a lot."

He gazed down at her, a look of awe on his face. "Melody," he said reverently as he cupped her face in his right hand. "What you just said, it was perfect, and I think you just wrote my song for me." He rubbed his thumb over her cheek. "You are so beautiful, outwardly yes, but also on the inside. And you're brilliant. Are you sure you're only eighteen?"

She smiled. "Well, I'll be nineteen in about five months."

"Oh, so that explains it," he said with a laugh. He sat down on the sand and patted the spot next to him.

They sat side by side listening to the sound of the waves crashing on the shore. The sky was clear, and the stars twinkled brightly overhead.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

She smiled up at him. "I was thinking how grateful I am to have waited on your grandparents that day at the restaurant, and then to come and work for them, and mostly, to have met you. Meeting you, Logan..." she sighed. "You have changed my life."

"I have? How? I mean, we've only been on a few dates."

"I know, right? But everything seems different. I wake up in the morning and immediately think of you, which immediately makes me think of God, because you told me that the first thing you do when you wake up is thank God for another day to serve Him. So, I think of you, and then I thank God for another day. And I thank Him especially if I'm gonna see you that day."

He turned his head to smile at her. "I do that too."

She looked up at him. "You do?"

"Absolutely. I think about you when I wake up. I wonder what you're doing, and I have to make myself focus on other things, but it's hard, Melody, because I can't wait to see you again. So, I start trying to plan ways to get to see you."

She stood up, a sweet smile on her face.

"Where are you going?" he said, looking up at her.

"Nowhere," she said as she moved forward, straddled his legs and sat on his lap, facing him.

His eyes opened wide. "Wow, now this is a gift."

She put her arms around his neck. "I'm sorry if this is too forward, but I'm feeling a little clingy. I mean, you're going away in the morning, and I'm gonna miss you so much."

He chuckled. "You cling as much as you want, Melody. I'm feelin' a little clingy myself." He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her forward. Their mouths came together in a soft, exploring kiss. He stopped and had to take a very deep breath to get control of himself.

"How will I get by without you for eight days?" she said softly.

He sighed. "Focus only on the present moment," he advised.

"I'm not sure if I can. You keep popping into my mind all the time."

He nodded and kissed her again, then pulled away and looked deeply into her eyes. "I'm gonna have a hard time too, Melody, but I've learned to take care of business no matter how I'm feeling."

"Hmm, that's a guy thing."

He grinned. "Maybe, I guess, but it'll work for you too. I mean, I'm gonna be working with people who are struggling in life, maybe homeless, maybe just having a hard year and barely able to make ends meet, maybe struggling with addiction, or with depression. I can't have my mind wandering away from what God may be telling me to do for them. I have to think of them. I have to stay in tune with God's voice so I'll know what to do. I wouldn't want to come home after such a great opportunity to serve others, and realize that I didn't do anything other than think of my girl. I'll have to force myself to focus on the people in front of me."

"Your girl. I like that," she said softly.

"I do too. Anyway, so, you can do the same thing while you're here. You said you now think of God first thing in the morning, right?"

She nodded.

"So ask Him, what can I do today, Father, to serve You? What does my mother need help with? What do my brothers need? What does the cashier at the grocery store need? What does the person sitting in the car next to you need? I've found a stronger faith, God, how can I show that to the world around me?"

She sighed and nodded as she thought of his words. "I *will* do that, Logan. I can do that."

He smiled. "Good, and I will too, and then, maybe I could call you each night and we could tell each other what we accomplished during the day.

Would that be okay?"

"If you call me? Uh, yeah," she said with a laugh as she leaned forward, her knees digging into the sand, and kissed him.

He sighed in pleasure, his hands sliding down to either side of her hips. Drawing another deep breath, he grabbed her and pushed her off his lap to lay her down in the sand. He hovered over her, softly kissing her face.

She sighed. "Why did you push me off you?"

"Umm, because my mind was going places it didn't need to go."

"Oh." She thought about it and smiled. "Sorry."

He smiled, leaned down and kissed her again.

"It's weird, though, Logan," she said once he'd pulled back to look at her.

"What's weird?"

"I mean, before that first real date, I was okay with not seeing you every day, or hearing from you every day. I wasn't struggling like I am now. But it's like, after that first kiss, it like, woke me up to all these feelings I'd been having about you. It brought them into focus, and now, I can't seem to be away from you without missing you terribly."

Logan sighed. "I feel the same way, Melody. And you just made me think of something interesting."

"What?"

"You said that first kiss, woke you up and that reminds me of the fairy tales where a prince kisses Sleeping Beauty, and also a prince kisses Snow White, right? And both times they wake up."

Melody giggled. "I'm so impressed that you know those fairy tales."

"Hey, some guy gets to kiss a hot girl, we take notice of something like that," he joked.

She giggled.

"Anyway, what I'm getting at is, maybe those moments in the story are allegories for the way a guy kisses his girl and it awakens her to the feelings that happen only between a man and a woman."

"Wow, Logan. That is very poetic."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Thanks, and I'm just thinking, about the movie producers and how now they've gone so obviously against God's laws, I bet they would hate that I can see a spark of something good and right and beautiful in those stories."

"You are blowing me away. You're being very impressive right now, Logan. You're so good, so deep, and I think I sense another song being written as we speak."

He smiled. "Me too." He shook his head. "Sorry I got carried away with my thoughts." He smiled at her. "Ahh, Melody, I AM gonna miss you."

"Maybe instead of calling me every night, you can call me in the morning too? Just a short call."

He thought and shook his head. "Maybe. But really, the time difference is three hours. If I call you like, before I start working, it would be five in the morning for you."

"That's okay. I don't mind. I mean, when I'm working, I usually get up by six so it's only an hour earlier. And maybe I can use the extra time to pray more, or to read the Bible."

"Melody, what am I gonna do with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everything you do and say, you're making my heart feel like it's gonna explode. I'm falling for you big time."

Her breath hitched. He pulled back so he could see her face clearly, worried that he'd said too much. His brow creased. "Mel? Why are you crying? I'm sorry if I said too much."

She sniffed and shook her head. "You didn't say too much. I'm sorry." She drew a breath. "You got to me, that's all."

He used his thumbs to wipe away her tears. "There," he said softly. He lowered his head and kissed her slowly, then stood up and held his hand out to her. "I need to get you back before everyone thinks we were rude to stay gone so long."

Sighing, she allowed him to pull her up and they walked back down the beach toward the house hand in hand.

✞✞✞

November 24th, 9:30 PM, Sunday Evening
Joey Adams Home, Newport Beach, California

Joey watched his wife as she brushed her long black hair at her dressing table in their bedroom. He smiled. He'd met her when he was twenty-nine. It wasn't long after that he married her. Back then her black hair was curly. She eventually told him it was a perm and that she did it to be different from her sister. The perm had worn off and she went back to her natural hair, which was only slightly wavy. She smiled at him with her big blue eyes. They'd now been married almost nine years, and they had three children: Sophia, age seven; Kelstyn, who was about to turn four; and Ledger, who had just turned three the day before and whose birthday they'd celebrated earlier that day.

"Thanks for getting Ledger to sleep for me," Breez said softly. "I didn't think he'd ever wind down."

"Well, all that sugar didn't help," Joey said.

"Thank goodness it's only once a year," she challenged.

"Once a year? Maybe *his* birthday is only once a year, but then there's Sophia's and Kelstyn's and yours, and Em's and all the other people in the family. And next May when all the little Kinos have their birthdays, we might as well just give up."

Breez frowned. "Hmm, Joey, maybe I need to look into some alternative cake recipes with no sugar. I mean, since there are getting to be so many birthdays in our family."

He smiled. "Good idea." He moved forward and took the brush from her hand. "Let me," he said softly.

She watched him in the mirror. Her strong, very lethal husband could be so gentle. She was so in love with him. When he smiled her heart almost stopped

beating. He did so now. “Are you tired, Breez?”

“I am.”

“Well, come to bed and see if you can get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow.”

“Are you coming to bed too?”

“Oh, absolutely. We might not have much privacy once we leave the house tomorrow morning, so come here and let me hold my sweet wife.”

“You have a sweet wife?”

He smiled. “I do. Would you like to meet her?”

Breez frowned. “Nah, she doesn’t sound like much fun.”

He lifted her from her seat and carried her to bed. “Oh believe me, she is.”

✝✝✝

November 24th, 10:00 PM, Sunday Evening

Mark Adams Home, Newport Beach, California

Mark eased into bed beside his wife, rolled toward her and took her in his arms. She sighed and cuddled up close. “Mmm, hello there, Master Mark.”

“Hello there, Mrs. Adams. Are you excited about tomorrow?”

“Yes. I’m looking forward to seeing our East Coast Family and I’m looking forward to serving so many of God’s people.”

“It should be an amazing experience. So, is that what you were lying here thinking about while I was finishing those briefs?”

“No, actually, I’d gone nostalgic.”

“Nostalgic? In what way?”

“I was thinking about the time we ran into each other at the ice cream place and stood in line together and I was really nervous.”

He placed his hand on her cheek. “Yeah, those were hard times, Bella. Why were you thinking about that?”

She smiled. “I guess I was thinking about the ice cream.”

He chuckled. “Are you having cravings?”

“Maybe,” she admitted.

“Do you want me to go get you some ice cream?”

“No! I would be so mad at you if you got up to do that, so don’t you dare.”

“Why not? It’s not much of a sacrifice. After all, you’re carrying our child.”

“And what a blessing that is. I mean, there was a time I thought I’d never be able to have another child.”

“It is a true blessing. I can’t imagine not having our little Emily in our lives. And the boys feel the same way.”

She sighed. “Speaking of the boys, do you think JoJo is gonna be okay?”

“Yes I do. I actually think he was a little washed out on football. It was something he said a few weeks ago. So, he may not be as disappointed as we think. Though I know he’s sad over the loss and feeling like he let his teammates down. Still, he’s gonna rise up. He’s gonna heal and figure out what he wants to do.”

“He just looked so down earlier today,” Bella said. “And that hurts my heart because he’s usually so up and cheerful.”

"Well, he might have seemed down, but part of that was because he was in pain. I mean physical pain. So, that probably had something to do with it."

She nodded. "Yes, and once he came home and took the pain meds they really knocked him out."

"Yeah, and I don't like him taking them, so, I'm gonna ask Jeffy for some of her herbal pain pills."

"Jordan said they work really well," Bella said.

"They have more clinical trials and they have to get past the FDA red tape, but they could go into mass production soon," Mark offered. "And that's gonna piss off big pharma. We have to get all our ducks in a row legally, so that the FDA thugs can't step in and try to block it. It's all in the timing. And we have to get Congressmen and Senators who will take our side if it comes down to that. Jeffy's patents and research records, manufacturing process and regulatory filings have to be airtight."

"The world is so filled with evil and greed," Bella said with a sigh. "Trying to stop healthy alternatives and pushing harmful drugs, not caring about the harm they cause. It's so evil."

"That's what we're fighting. The greed. The corruption. The darkness. The evil. We expect it. We're on the battlefield and we will fight until the end."

She snuggled closer to her warrior husband. "So, when does it end?"

Mark smiled. "When Jesus comes again."

Bella yawned. "I'm so looking forward to that day."

"Me too, baby. Me too."

✝✝✝

November 24th, 7:30 PM, Sunday Evening

Redwood Hills Medical Center, Los Angeles, California

"Make sure you hold her head," Mickey said softly.

Jeremy nodded. "Mom, you've said that about ten times now."

Jeff smiled as he watched his youngest son sit on the small couch in the hospital room and gaze down at his baby sister. He was being very careful to hold her gently and keep her head supported. He leaned forward and kissed her forehead which made Jeff's heart tumble. Danny boy had already had his turn, but still leaned over and also kissed his sister's forehead.

"Whaddya think, guys?" Jeff asked.

"She's so little," Dan said.

Jeremy nodded.

"Well," Mickey said. "She's gonna grow up pretty fast. By this time next year she's gonna be probably triple what she weighs now and may even be walking around. So we have to enjoy every single minute of her being tiny."

"Speaking of that," Jeff said as he pulled out his phone. "Look up here guys and let's capture the moment."

Jeff snapped several pics and then switched over to video. Mickey complained when he turned the camera on her, which made him laugh. "Why not get you in the video? You're beautiful," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm sure I look a mess right now."

"Mick, you look amazing right now. You just gave birth to a baby and your face is glowing, your eyes are shining, your hair..." He stopped, smiled. "Well, your hair is a mess, but even that's cute." He handed the phone to Dan. "Here, son, take some video while I give little Scarlett back to your mom."

Dan took the phone while Jeff gently took the baby from Jeremy and handed her to Mickey, who immediately started cooing and nuzzling her little daughter. "You are gonna be so cherished," Mickey said softly. "You will never know the ugliness that I knew my entire life."

"Your entire life until about fourteen years ago. From the time you married me, your life has been a dream, right?"

She laughed. "Yep. You were my knight in shining armor."

"I still am," he said softly. "I will keep you safe always." He looked over at his sons, then back to the bundle in his wife's arms. "And you too, Scarlett. And your brothers, sweet girl, they will also always protect you and keep you safe. Right guys?"

The boys nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir," they mumbled.

When the phone started ringing, Dan quickly handed it to his dad.

Jeff looked at the phone and smiled and accepted the video call and pointed the phone at his wife.

Mickey looked up at the phone and smiled. "Rissa! Hey again!"

Rissa giggled. "Hey Mickey. Jeff, point the phone at Scarlett better, I can only see half her face."

Jeff adjusted. "Better?"

"Yep. So how's my little niece doing?" Marissa said.

"She's doing awesome," Mickey answered. "She was just saying hello to her brothers."

"Hey guys," Rissa said. "Whaddya think?"

"Hey Aunt Rissa. I think she's pretty awesome," Dan answered.

"Me too," Jeremy added.

"So, when is *your* baby gonna be born?" Dan asked.

"Well, that's the other reason why I'm calling, so, about your cousin, I'm in the car right now— on the way to the hospital."

"What? Really? Oh my goodness, Rissa! How close are your contractions?"

"They're twelve minutes apart, but they've been fifteen minutes apart for about four hours, and my doctor wants me to go in and get checked."

"Oh, I'm so excited. Rissa, I'm so sorry. I wish I could be there for you."

"It's okay, Mick. I'm good. Chris' mom has been so good to me and she's on her way, and she'll be here in about four hours. And I have like a gazillion friends out here."

"Why does that not surprise me? Have you called Jeffy and Cam?"

"No, they're next. Though Jeffy probably already knows."

Mickey giggled.

"Hey Chris, how ya holdin' up, buddy?" Jeff asked.

Marissa turned the phone toward him. "Oh, you know me. Calm and steady under pressure."

"Well, you don't get to be an SAC if you're not."

"He's lying to you," Marissa put in quickly. "He almost couldn't put on his own shoes."

Jeff laughed. "It's okay, Coley, I understand and I won't tell anyone, well, I won't tell Jason anyway."

"Thanks a lot, man," Chris said.

Marissa suddenly moaned loudly. "Oh, wow, this is a hard one. Oh, Chris," she cried.

"Breathe, Rissa," Mickey coached. "Breathe sweetie."

Rissa took several deep breaths. "Oh, wow, that was the hardest one. Darn it, Mickey, that one hurt bad. Why didn't you tell me it hurt so much?"

Mickey giggled. "I didn't want to scare you."

"Great, well now I *am* scared."

"Uh, me too," Chris said, making everyone laugh.

Rissa looked at her phone. "Jeffy's trying to call me."

"Take the call. She'll be able to help you better than me."

"Okay, bye, Mick. I love you."

The call ended.

Jeff immediately put the phone down and went to comfort his wife, who was now crying.

"She's gonna be okay, Mick. She's in good hands."

Mickey nodded and sniffed. "I just wish I could be there for her."

"I know, but babe, it didn't work out that way and we can't do anything about it, so what can we do other than pray for her?"

"You're right," she said as she wiped at her face. She sighed. "Jeff, it's getting late and I need to sleep some. I guess you need to take the boys home and I'll see you guys bright and early in the morning."

"I hate to leave you."

"It's just the one night, and I really need to sleep. Tomorrow we'll bring our daughter to her new home and we'll all be together."

Jeff nodded. "I can't wait."

✞✞✞

November 24th, 10:00 PM Sunday Night
Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Cam stood at the window overlooking the beautiful, large front lawn of the Kino estate. He and Jeffy had married on that lawn beneath a white canopy covered with flowers and ribbons. He smiled as he remembered how he'd been afraid that she would never agree to marry him. Somewhere inside himself he'd found the courage to tell her plainly what he believed about men and women, husbands and wives, and the sacred roles God had established within marriage. He had stepped forward to lead, and, surprisingly, Jeffy had chosen to trust and follow him.

It had been hard for her at first. They both knew that Jeffy's brain capacity far exceeded his, and there was no way he could keep up with the workings of her brilliant mind. But she learned that she could trust him to protect their

family, make difficult decisions, and steady her when her thoughts moved too fast. Once she'd begun to trust him, she discovered that she didn't have to carry every decision or remain in control of every moment. She could relax her mind, let go, and simply be—and she found that to be not only enjoyable but deeply attractive.

Sighing, he turned from the window and gazed at her. She'd just gotten off the phone with the girl who'd actually been his best friend almost his whole life, Marissa Daley, now Marissa Coley. Who would've known that his female best friend would marry a guy who was also one of his closest friends in the world. Chris Coley had been one of Jeffy's bodyguards when she left the country back when everyone was trying to end her life. He and Cam had worked closely together. Chris had been severely wounded in the line of duty. But he'd survived. Now, Chris and Marissa were married, he was the Senior Agent in Charge at the Ameritech New York office and they were about to have their first child, sometime tonight probably.

Cam sighed as he looked at his own family. Jeffy sat in the rocking chair next to their bed nursing their son. He shook his head. He had a son, and he intended to be as good a father as Grandmaster Kino, as Ricky Kino, as Joey and Mark Adams and Jeff Davis. His eyes moistened and Jeffy glanced up at him with a sweet smile.

"You are," she said.

He gave a soft laugh. "Guess I forgot to block you."

She made a face. "I wasn't trying. It just jumped out at me."

"I've actually noticed you getting stronger and stronger about feeling and reading others. Think about it. You diagnosed Gabe and Taylor and Bree from ten miles away."

She nodded. "Well, actually, I should be able to do it whether it's ten miles or thousands of miles. It's all a matter of what I believe I can do at the time. Sometimes I feel strong. Other times, not so much."

He went to her and kissed the top of her head, then leaned down and gently kissed the cheek of his nursing son. "And how do you feel right now?"

She smiled. "Like I can take on the world." She frowned. "And— and..."

"What is it, Jeffy?"

She drew several deep breaths. "Cam, this trip to Georgia, it's gonna test us. It's gonna test us all." She blinked up at her husband.

He stood with his eyebrows raised and motioned with his hand. "Okay, babe, but ya gotta give me more than that."

She sighed, closed her eyes. Moaned. Shook her head as tears welled and spilled over. "I, I can't see it. I just know it's gonna be trying. I see, anger, rage. I see, crying. I see, a knife coming down, piercing skin. I see someone covered in bruises. I see, darkness. No, I see light. Oh, I can't see clearly."

"Are you sure we're in Georgia?"

She closed her eyes again and then nodded her head. She looked down as little Eli let go and started to fuss. "He feels it," she said softly.

Cam lifted Eli up into his arms and softly bounced him. "It's okay, little

guy," he whispered. "Daddy's got you." He put him up against his chest and patted his back gently.

Jeffy sat back and closed her eyes, stretching her muscular legs as she tried to relax and concentrate.

"Jeffy, can you give me anything else?"

She sat there for a minute before she answered. "I'm sorry, Cam. I can't pinpoint it. It seems like a series of events. I see a knife. I feel pain. I see a gun. Maybe several guns. Someone floundering in the water, drowning maybe. I see like, something big and dark."

"A man?"

"A demon. They don't want us to do this thing. They don't want us to accomplish this *Thanksgiving Feeding of the Five Thousand*. It will start something. Something nationwide. The little town of Pine Forest, Georgia is gonna show the world something, and they can't let that happen."

"Who can't?"

"The dark forces. The bad guys."

He breathed deeply. "Will someone die?"

She sat quietly another minute. "I can't tell. Maybe. I almost don't want to go now."

He frowned. "That doesn't sound like the warrior girl I know."

"The girl you knew who was ready to take on the world, is now a mother, and all I can think about is protecting my child."

"Is Elijah in danger?"

She sighed. "I don't think so."

He nodded. "So, we could stay home I guess. But, does that feel right to you, Jeffy?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. We stay safe at home while the rest of my family ventures out into the battlefield? No way, Cam. Of course we'll go."

He nodded. "I was hoping you would see the error in being afraid to go. Jeffy, God trusts you. He gives you what you need to see. He gives it to you to warn you, to warn us all. I know He doesn't expect you to chicken out."

She sighed. "Sorry. I had a moment of weakness. Do I have to be Supergirl at all times?"

He laid Eli in his crib and turned to take Jeffy in his arms. "No, babe, you don't have to be all the time. Just most of the time. I'll let the family know to expect trouble. We'll take God's warning seriously. And we *will* accomplish our goal in Georgia of feeding five thousand. I'll make sure of it."

She raised her face to him and he kissed her softly. "Now, you get some sleep. I'm gonna go speak with your Dad real quick."

She nodded. "Thanks for taking care of business. I love you, Cameron Wallace."

"And I love you, June Flower Kino Wallace."

✝✝✝

November 24th, 10:30 PM, Sunday Night
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky came quietly back into the bedroom, slowly climbed into bed and closed his eyes. He opened them again though when his beautiful wife rolled over and snuggled up to him. "Was that Jeff?"

He put his arm around her. "I was trying not to wake you."

She gave a soft laugh. "Well, you failed miserably."

"Sorry."

"I was just kidding. I heard your phone buzz, and I knew you were going out to keep from waking me, which, by the way, is very sweet."

He laughed. "Yep, that's me. I'm a sweetheart." He gave her a quick kiss.

"Umm, that was nice," she purred. "So, you didn't answer me. Was that Jeff again? Is everything okay?"

"No, it wasn't Jeff. It was Dad. Jeffy has had some kind of ominous premonitions about this trip to Georgia and Dad and Cam are calling everyone so that we will be prepared and ready to do battle."

Bree sighed. "Great." She was silent a moment. "Of course, Satan doesn't want us to accomplish our goal in Georgia, because it might bring too much light to the world and it might touch hearts that he doesn't want touched."

Ricky nodded. "Exactly. But we won't let that stop us. We'll put on the full armor of God and go for it."

Bree cuddled up closer. "I love it when you talk tough."

He rolled over onto her. "Not toxic?"

She laughed. "Not toxic. Actually, pretty seductive."

"That's what I was going for," he said as he kissed her.

✝✝✝

November 24th, 10:45 PM, Sunday Night
South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Taylor sat up in bed. She and Gabe had been so good about not sneaking in to see each other in the middle of the night. Actually, Gabe had been good about it. She, on the other hand, longed to be in his presence all the time. She thought about the fact that they were headed back to his home in Georgia in the morning and that she wouldn't be as physically close to him as she is now with him being right down the hall. Add to that the fact that he would probably remain in Georgia until after Christmas, while she would be coming back to Cali, and that made her feel like she was gonna fall completely apart. It put her in a panic.

She probably needed to share these feelings with her mom or dad, or grandfather or grandmother. Young Eric had his support group always at his beck and call. His "brothers." JoJo, Logan, and now Gabe. Taylor had no female cousins her age. How she longed for a sister. Then her eyes lit up. She did have Jordan, who would probably eventually be her sister-in-law. She felt certain she could share her feelings with her. Nodding her head, she made the decision that she would do just that. But not tonight. Tonight she would head to the place that she longed to be.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she went to the bathroom to freshen up and then headed to her door, peeked out to make sure no one was

around and padded down the hall to the first door on the left past the staircase. Easing the door open she peeked in and saw immediately that he wasn't in bed because his beautiful silhouette stood out in front of the solid glass French doors that led out to the balcony. He turned around.

"Tay? Is that you?"

"Yes. Can I come in?"

"Of course."

She crept in and turned to silently close the door. He walked to the bed and turned on the bedside lamp.

She smiled at him, looked him over. His chest was bare. He wore some navy blue and black plaid flannel pajama bottoms that rode low on his hips. She drew a deep breath. "I— I needed to see you."

"I'm glad, because I was just thinking about coming to see you."

"Really?"

He smiled. "Is that so hard to believe?"

She shrugged. "Well, you're much stronger than I am."

"Not really. Just have more fear."

"Fear?"

"More men for me to answer to. Your dad, your brother, your uncles, your cousins, my dad."

She gave a soft laugh as she came around the bed to stand in front of him.

He looked her over. Her long dark hair fell in waves over her shoulders and down almost to her waist. She wore a charcoal gray nightshirt with the word "Believe" written in bright pink cursive. The shirt came almost to her knees. He frowned. "What, no Tweety-bird tonight?"

"It was getting too small for me."

He smiled. "You're not even fully grown yet, are you?"

She frowned. "I'm not a child if that's what you're trying to say."

He nodded and reached out and touched her cheek with one finger, ran it down her face to her chin, over her chin and down her neck and finally stopped at the ribbing of her shirt. "I'm not saying that at all, because that would be a total vibe killer."

She giggled. "Besides, you're probably not finished growing either, right?"

He nodded. "Yep, I probably have a few more inches to go." Reaching out, he pulled her to him, raised her face and kissed her softly.

He pulled away to look at her again. Her eyes were closed now. She swayed on her feet. The pull was so strong. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

"So, why are you awake?" he asked her.

She sighed. "I was thinking about things. They're about to change, and I don't want them to."

He took her hand. "Come sit with me on the balcony for a few minutes."

He pulled on a T-shirt, picked up a blanket, and led her through the French doors. They settled together on one of the cushioned chairs and he draped the blanket around her shoulders. She leaned against him.

He put his arm around her and rubbed her shoulder. "Okay," he said softly.

"Tell me all about the things you say are about to change."

"We're going to Georgia, and you won't be just down the hall from me anymore. You'll be at your house. I'll be at the Inn and then at our new house maybe, depending on how much work has been done by the renovators. We'll probably not see each other much while we're there because we're gonna be working so hard, and the week is gonna go by so fast, and then I'm gonna leave and come back here and you're gonna stay in Georgia with your family. And I understand that you miss your family and want to be with them, but for me, *you* are my family and the thought of being away from you is horrifying, it's like, making me feel sick, and I can't stand it."

He pulled her close and held her a few minutes. "Tay, you are so sweet."

"How is that sweet? It's idiotic. I'm supposed to be almost an adult. Grown. But I'm acting like an idiot. We have this amazing opportunity to go to Pine Forest and do something awesome for people and I should be thinking about that, but all I can think about is you and how much I'm gonna miss you when it's all over and I know I'm supposed to focus on the moment in front of me, but I'm really having a hard time doing that, and that just makes me so immature, I know, but I can't help it."

"Okay, okay. I get it. And I don't think it makes you immature. It's just that—our love is so powerful. It's hard for me too, Taylor. I want to be with you all the time. I'm totally in love with you and the need for you is powerful. But, you wouldn't have much respect for me if instead of working hard at something I just lay around with you all day every day, right? I mean, I'm supposed to be acting like a man, and a man has work he has to do. I have to work hard at this giant undertaking that God has asked Rose to accomplish. I know you understand that, right?"

"Yes."

"And then, this might be the last time I spend Christmas with my family as like, a kid, ya know? So, I have to treasure that, right?"

Taylor nodded.

"And I'm gonna have two new siblings that I will hardly even know because I'll be gone most of the time. And I want to know them. And I want you to know them. And you will and I will, because I intend to make that happen somehow. Taylor, I intend to eventually marry you. You know that, right? I mean, we usually don't actually say the words, but maybe you need to hear it. That is my intention. Get through this coming holiday. Get back here and start training to be a JETT. That right there is a good job. And then you and I will also work on our ministry. I'll attend your high school graduation, and then ask your father for your hand in marriage. Then I'll ask you to marry me. And then, assuming you say 'yes,' we'll plan a wedding, or I'll let you and the moms plan a wedding and then live with you, make love to you, have babies with you and be totally happy.

"That's what I intend. But I can't do any of that if I don't work hard to make something of myself so that I can support you. And that working hard means I have to be away from you sometimes. And don't think that I haven't

thought that you too might have your own intentions and plans that you just haven't discussed with me yet. And that's okay. You don't have to tell me your exact plans. You might want to go to college, reach for something. I hope you want to continue on in dance, because you're like, so good at it. But ya know what, Tay? It would be nice to know that you're thinking along the same lines as me. It would be nice to know if you're not." He glanced at her. "Not that you have to make any decisions right now, but I'm just saying, let's get through this time apart and then Tay, we can be—together—always."

She smiled up at him, her eyes moist with unshed tears. "Oh, Gabe, that was beautiful. You were right, I did need to hear that. And I have a confession to make. I've been thinking about being your wife for a long time now. It's all I want to do. Yes, I want to pursue dance because it's fun, and it's a challenge. Still, my main goal is to be your wife and have lots of babies. And be the best mother I can be."

Gabe closed his eyes. "Thank you, Father," he whispered, then turned and kissed her very passionately. When he lifted his head he smiled down at her. "Thank you for that. It's really good to hear what you've been thinking. And now, I have to backtrack. I mean, I need to make one thing clear. I mean everything I said, but I don't expect you to plan out your whole life tonight. You're only seventeen, and still have school, dance, and choices ahead of you and I don't want to get in the way of you making the right choices. I want you to discover what God is calling you to do. If, as we grow, you ever realize that your path is different from mine, you have to tell me. We have to be in complete honesty. I don't ever want you to feel, like, trapped or pressured by what I say I want. You might change your mind about me."

"I will not."

"You might."

"I'd be crazy."

"Still, you might. I'm just sayin' that if you do, I'll understand. I don't want you to feel pressure, that's all I'm saying."

"Okay, I don't feel pressure," she said. "And I don't believe my path is different from yours."

He ran his hand over her face. "I love you, Tay."

"I love you, Gabe."

He kissed her again, lingered a moment, then reluctantly pulled away. "I should walk you back to your room."

"Oh please, Gabe, please hold me for a few more minutes. I'm not ready for this night to end."

He sighed. "You, Tay, are very tempting."

"Just fifteen more minutes. You can set a timer."

"I'm struggling," he admitted.

She rested her head against his shoulder. "I won't make it harder for you," she whispered.

Gabe shook his head. If she only knew. She was so very innocent. He kissed the top of her head and set the timer on his phone. "Fifteen minutes, right here

on the balcony. Close your eyes and dream about our plans."

She smiled and sighed in pleasure, glad that she had decided to share her fears with the guy she loved.

✞✞✞

November 24th, 11:15 PM, Sunday Night

Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Shelley glanced at the clock as Eric came back in the room and got in bed. "Is everything okay?"

"Right now, yes."

She snuggled close. "Thank you," she said softly.

"For what?"

"For always taking care of business. If something happens and you have to get up and handle it, you always do it without complaining. You just take care of business no matter how tired you are."

He smiled. "Well, what's the alternative?"

She laughed softly. "Yeah, good question. I guess taking care of business is the only thing you *can* do. You can't just shrug your shoulders and go back to bed, huh?"

"No, I can't. Just like when a woman is nursing a child. She gets up in the middle of the night, sometimes several times a night, and feeds the baby. Right? There is really no alternative."

Shelley smiled and nodded. "Well, there's a bottle."

He chuckled.

Shelley giggled. "So, what business had to be taken care of this time?"

He sighed. "Jeffy had a premonition. Cam felt like it was strong enough that we should warn everyone. So, he discussed it with me and then he called Joey and I called Jason and Ricky, just to give them a heads up."

"And who called Mark and Justin and Jeff? Oh, and Keegan?"

"Joey called Keegan, and Mark. Jason called Justin. Ricky will call Jeff and will talk to young Eric and Gabe and Taylor. Mark will talk to JoJo and Logan. Logan will talk to Melody. Melody will talk to her family. Anyone else you want to know about?"

She gave a soft laugh. "No, I guess all you men will work tirelessly to make sure everyone is protected, huh?"

Eric smiled. "Ya think?" He sighed. "We'll try to do our best, and with God's help, we'll succeed."

She laid her head on his chest and ran her hand over his heart. "And did the premonition have anything to do with you?"

"No. Not specifically anyway. Why? Are you worried about me?"

"Not really. I mean, if God was gonna let you go, I don't think He would have gone to all the trouble of bringing you back to life."

Eric drew a quick breath as a familiar vibration moved through his body. He smiled. "I just got a message in my head, a message from God."

"Really? What did He say?"

"He said, 'No trouble at all.'"

She giggled. "He does have a sense of humor."

Eric nodded with a smile. They lay silently together for a few minutes, Shelley's hand moving slowly back and forth across Eric's chest.

It was Shelley who broke the silence. "I'm so grateful."

Eric patted her hand. "I know you are. I am too. Getting to lie here next to you, to feel you pressed against me. To hear your voice. To feel your hand move over me. Getting to know those five precious children in the next room and the new one across the hall. My heart is so full and I'm so grateful."

Shelley sniffed. "Just a few months ago, I was in a world of hurt. I didn't want to live without you. I know that's selfish, because we have children who needed me. But just between you and me, I didn't want to live anymore. Not without you."

He pushed her off his chest onto the bed and leaned over her. "Shelley girl, I know that trauma has not healed yet. It may take a while. So don't live in the past. Live in the right now. Right now, as you said, we have so much to be grateful for. I'm right here. We're conversing. I can touch you," he said as he stroked his hand down her soft cheek. "And I'm about to show you that we are as young as ever."

His head dipped. He kissed her. Shelley sighed. "Eric Kino, I am so lucky to have you and I am so in love with you."

"Aww, my sweet Shelley Kino, I love you too, and I really do thank God every day that He sent me to find you. And now here we are, with our children having children and giving us loads of grandchildren—and maybe, if young Eric does what I think he's gonna do, we'll soon have a great-grandchild. That circle of life is so beautiful and precious as long as we are able to steadfastly teach our children that God is real. As long as they know that, the circle of life will be filled with joy because they all will try to carry on the legacy to live in honor and integrity and love and serve God first. God doesn't want to lose one of His children. I don't want to lose even one of mine, so I know a little bit of how He feels. Father, I pray you will send your angels to watch over our children, to lead them and guide them. I know they have lessons to learn. But please protect them from the dark forces that would steal their souls. I pray, in Jesus' name."

"Amen," Shelley whispered.

✝✝✝

Proverbs 22:6
"Train up a child in the way he should go:
and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

✝✝✝

Dear Father,

As you filled my heart with the parables in this book, it struck me that there was so much in here about fathers and sons and how amazing the men in these books are for their sons, and that made me think of how Jesus is in the Bible—the absolute devotion of the Son to the Father. He said, "I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me." *(John 14:31)* And He said, "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God:" *(Mark 10:18)* So, praise You, Father, and praise You, Jesus and thank You Holy Spirit. What a beautiful example. Jesus showed absolute devotion to the Father. They are one. We, your children are in your loving hands, Father. I pray all who read these words will draw close to You and You will heal them and fill them with Your love and peace and catch us up to live with You. Jesus, thank you for the most beautiful gift of all, eternal life in the presence of God. Wow. So much love. So much honor. The power of love and honor and goodness is overwhelming. Continue to be with us I pray, in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen.

✝✝✝

A Note from McCartney Green...

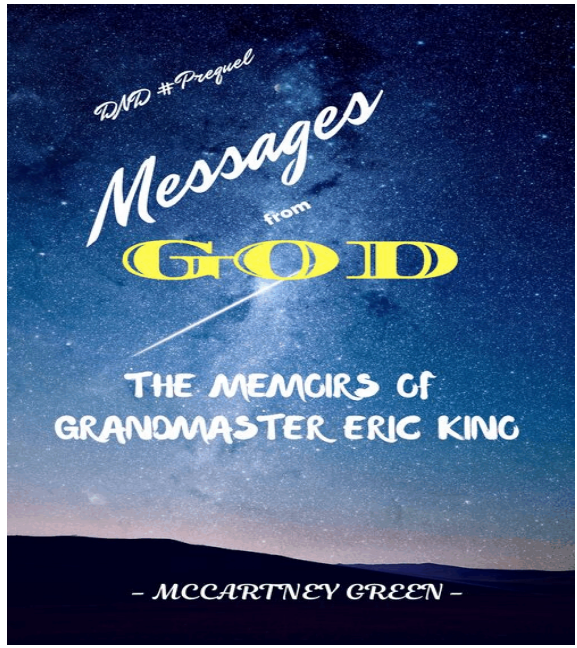
I will go where God leads me; I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

Before the story begins...
Discover the extraordinary event that changed ten-year-old Eric Kino forever. This short prequel reveals the miraculous experience that shaped the man readers come to know throughout the series. An essential read.

Before Eric Kino became the man readers have come to know throughout this series, he was simply a ten-year-old boy whose life was changed forever. Messages From God is the beginning of that journey—a brief but pivotal story that sheds new light on everything that follows.

Although this memoir was written after the first eight novels, it tells the earliest and perhaps *most important story* in Eric Kino's life. If you've ever wondered what shaped the man who would become Grandmaster Eric Kino, this is where that journey begins.



Continue the Journey

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series

by McCartney Green

#1 A Healing-In Jesus' Name
#2 Suffer the Children-In Jesus' Name
#3 Finding Home-In Jesus' Name
#4 Weeds Grow-In Jesus' Name
#5 Angels-In Jesus' Name
#6 The Worth of Souls-In Jesus' Name
#7 Warriors-In Jesus' Name
#8 June Flower-In Jesus' Name
#9 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name
#10 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name (Part Two)
#11 Circle of Life-In Jesus' Name (Part Three)
#12 Feed My Sheep-In Jesus' Name
#13 For Unto Us-In Jesus' Name
#14 Such A Time As This-In Jesus' Name

Prequel- Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

and just for fun... Kino Martial Arts Student Handbook

All Books Free Download at: mccartneygreen.org

About the Books

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series currently includes fourteen novels and one prequel memoir. Each story brings its own message of faith, courage, love, healing, and hope while following the ever-growing circle of family and friends surrounding the Kinos.

Although each book contains a complete story and may be read on its own, the characters' lives continue from one novel to the next. Readers will experience the fullest journey by beginning with Book One and reading the series in order.

#1—A Healing—In Jesus' Name

When Shelley Adams crosses paths with Grandmaster Eric Kino, she is still carrying wounds from a trauma that changed the course of her life. Eric sees far beyond the frightened, uncertain woman she believes herself to be—and recognizes the strength, beauty, and purpose within her.

A Healing introduces the Kino and Adams families, the Lee brothers, and the dangerous Crane brothers in a story of love, courage, spiritual healing, and freedom from the victim identity. It is the beginning of the family—and the journey—that will grow throughout the entire series.

#2—Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name

Fourteen-year-old Toby Nash is an ordinary boy with an extraordinary heart. He loves baseball, dreams of helping and healing animals, and thinks becoming a singer might be pretty cool someday. Then he meets twelve-year-old Caroline and recognizes the carefully hidden signs that something is terribly wrong in her life.

As Toby and those around him struggle to protect a wounded child, Suffer the Children confronts the devastating realities of abuse while showing the difference one observant, courageous person can make. It is a story of rescue, patient love, faith, and the long road toward learning to feel safe.

#3—Finding Home—In Jesus' Name

Lisa Lewis has spent years building a successful life while distancing herself from the painful family secrets she left behind. When circumstances bring her to Pine Forest, Georgia, she encounters Chaz Stewart, his

remarkable family, and the grandmother who never stopped loving her.

Finding Home introduces Chaz, Lisa, Maddie, Jodi, John, and the Pine Forest family whose lives will soon become closely entwined with the Kinos. Through romance, danger, buried truth, teen pregnancy, incest, and post-traumatic stress, this story asks what it truly means to come home.

#4—Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name

The entire Kino family returns in a story centered on movie star and martial arts champion Ricky Kino and the fiercely independent Breanna Adams. Their love has never been simple, and the choices they make will affect not only their own future but the lives of the young people watching them.

As danger takes root close to home, Weeds Grow explores family relationships, fatherhood, personal identity, sexuality, fear, hatred, and the courage required to confront what has been allowed to grow in darkness. Some weeds can be pulled. Others fight to survive.

#5—Angels—In Jesus' Name

Widowed mother Lizzy Anderson is raising five little girls while working nights as a nurse and doing everything she can to hold her family together. Special Agent Keegan Tanner is dark, dangerous, driven—and carrying evidence that could expose a horrifying criminal operation.

When their lives collide, Lizzy and Keegan are drawn into a battle involving corruption, assault, child trafficking, and powerful people willing to destroy anyone who stands in their way. With help from the Kinos, the Pine Forest family, and Ameritech, they must discover whether wounded people can still trust love—and whether ordinary human beings can sometimes become angels for one another.

#6—The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name

Jeff Davis returns in a story that introduces Mickey, a fierce young woman who has spent much of her life believing she is expendable. When she is taken by people who place no value on human life, Jeff and the growing Ameritech family will risk everything to bring her home.

The Worth of Souls is a story of kidnapping, sacrifice, courage, first love, and the immeasurable value of every human soul. It also offers an

unforgettable glimpse of teenage Jeffy Kino and Cameron Wallace—two young people whose connection will help shape the future of the series.

#7—Warriors—In Jesus' Name

Shelley's youngest sons, Mark and Joey Adams, are grown men now, each carrying the teachings, strength, and example of the family that raised them. But even the strongest warriors may find themselves facing enemies they cannot defeat with physical skill alone.

Warriors confronts domestic violence in its most recognizable and insidious form—the gradual isolation, control, fear, and destruction of a person's spirit. It is a story about recognizing abuse, finding the courage to escape it, and learning that true strength is not found in domination, but in love, protection, truth, and freedom.

#8—June Flower—In Jesus' Name

June Flower Kino—Jeffy to those who love her—has grown from the miraculous child introduced in Book One into a gifted physician whose discoveries may change the future of medicine. But there are powerful people who will do anything to prevent that future from arriving.

Her journey takes her across the world, into danger, loss, breathtaking beauty, and the lives of two unforgettable Ugandan children. As Cameron Wallace returns to protect the girl he never stopped loving, the entire cast of the series gathers for a sweeping story of courage, family, sacrifice, healing, reunion, and one final twist that reveals the story may be far from over.

#9—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name

The next generation steps forward as the series moves between Hollywood and Pine Forest, Georgia. Young Eric Kino begins questioning the path laid before him, while Marine Raider Jacob Appel returns home and discovers that the girl he has known all his life may no longer be merely the little sister figure he left behind.

Meanwhile, seventeen-year-old Gabe Tanner—the charismatic only son in a family of beautiful sisters—is beginning a journey that will alter the lives of both the Tanner and Kino families. Love grows, danger gathers, and a shocking ending given to the author in a dream changes everything.

#10—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Two

The story continues as Gabe Tanner and those who love him struggle with the consequences of what came before. Families draw closer, young relationships deepen, and faith is tested as darkness attempts to reshape the lives of the next generation.

At the same time, Eric Kino III begins to see his own path more clearly when he encounters a young woman stranded beside a highway. One act of compassion opens the door to a story larger than either of them expects, proving once again that a seemingly ordinary moment may be part of God's extraordinary plan.

#11—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Three

As Young Eric recovers and the younger generation rises to meet challenges of its own, old roles begin to shift. Children become leaders. Parents learn to step back. New heroes emerge, new relationships take root, and Gabe and Taylor's growing influence creates waves far beyond their families.

The expanding circle of Kinos, Tanners, Appels, Stewarts, and friends is eventually drawn toward Pine Forest, Georgia, where new spirits are arriving, long-awaited purposes are becoming clear, and an enormous undertaking will require every willing hand and faithful heart.

#12—Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name

The warriors gather in Pine Forest with a mission: to serve God's children, meet practical needs, restore hope, and allow miracles to unfold. What begins as a tremendous act of faith and generosity grows into something far greater than anyone imagined.

But darkness does not stand by quietly while people are fed, healed, reunited, and awakened. As opposition mounts, this extraordinary family refuses to be deterred. Secrets are revealed, wounds are healed, lives are transformed, and the command to "feed My sheep" becomes far more than a simple call to provide food.

#13—For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name

For the first time, celebrate the Christmas season with the Kinos, Tanners, and the enormous family of friends God has gathered around

them. As they prepare to honor the birth of Jesus Christ, they discover new opportunities to serve, forgive, welcome, and love.

Old friends return. Former enemies reappear. Strangers arrive carrying needs that may not be immediately visible. Through celebration, surprises, conflict, and acts of compassion, For Unto Us asks what might happen if people celebrated the Savior's birth not only with words and traditions, but by becoming His hands and heart in the world.

#14—Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

A mysterious stranger arrives in Pine Forest searching for answers about his family's past—and carrying the weight of a darkness that has plagued generations. His arrival may also hold an unexpected answer for twenty-three-year-old Lily Tanner, Miss Maddie's former protégée and now a gifted chef at the Pine Forest Inn, who has begun to wonder whether everyone in her family has found love except her.

But the stranger's story is only one part of a much greater gathering. Grandmaster Eric Kino begins to discover that he is not the only person whose life was changed by an angelic encounter at the age of ten. One by one, others emerge—men who disappeared for three days, returned with a calling, and were sent to teach the world.

The Spirit reveals that there are twelve in all. As these chosen men are miraculously drawn together, their first shared mission leads them to Pine Forest, where dark forces are already at work and an entire family is under attack. Old mysteries awaken, new love takes root, and warriors from across the world gather for a battle that may reveal why each of them was called for such a time as this.

What Readers Are Saying

Featured Reader Review...

"I just finished book nine in this series—DND #9—and I can honestly say I've been hooked since I started a few weeks ago. I found the author's website and began listening to her read the books aloud, and I haven't been able to stop since.

"The best way I can describe these books is that they're like a "how-to" manual for living as a Christian, told through an incredible story. Despite being the best fiction I've ever heard, the characters stay true to their faith—they don't cuss, and they don't sleep around before marriage. Instead, they lead by example, showing what it means to live a life guided by Christ.

"The books don't shy away from real-life struggles either. They walk you through tough situations, showing how to respond with faith—when to pray, how to pray, and how to lean on God through it all. I've read the Bible so many times that, at one point, I started to feel a little numb to it. But these books brought a fresh perspective that reminded me why I love Scripture in the first place.

"I'd recommend this series over watching TV or just about anything else the world has to offer—except reading the Bible itself."

More Reader Comments...

"I know deeply in my heart that your books will indeed be used as training manuals. My spirit was a witness to that when I heard you speak it when I first started listening to the books. That lit a fire under me to listen to them all, ASAP!" Yvonne Espy

"Angels is my new favorite book! I had the weekend off and all I did was read. I couldn't put it down. I only have a few pages left but I don't want it to end. Plus when I finish I will have to wait until your next book comes out. I just wanted to tell you how much I LOVED reading this book!"

"Just when I thought your books couldn't get any better I was proven wrong with Weeds Grow! What an exciting, great book. I am having trouble getting my work done because I can't put it down. You are an amazing writer and I have to say WOW!"

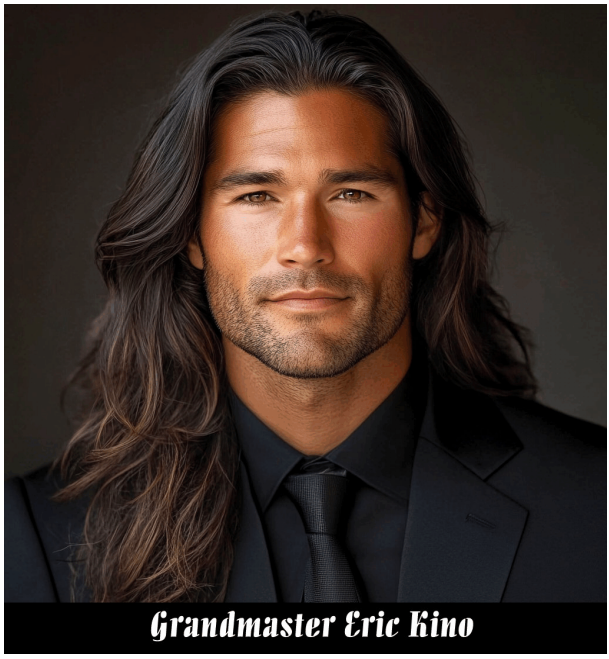
“I absolutely love DND #1. I can't wait to start reading the other books in the series. I was amazed at how addicted I became to the book. I can't stop thinking about the characters and their stories. I can definitely relate to Shelley's self confidence issues. Her strength is so great and makes me feel like I can be as strong as her in whatever situation life has to throw my way. Thank you for writing such an inspirational and motivating book.”

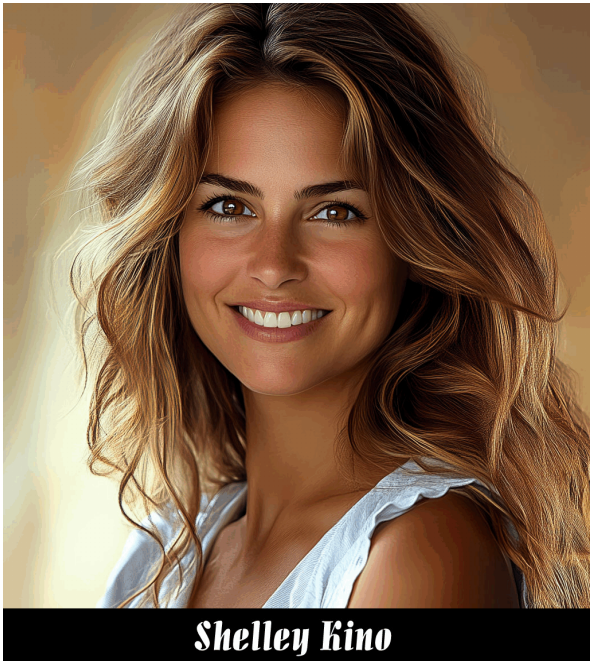
“I have read the first three books and I love them all. They are addicting! The problem is, I don't get enough sleep when I read them because I can't put them down! I am now having withdrawals because I don't have the 4th book. McCartney- you are great.”

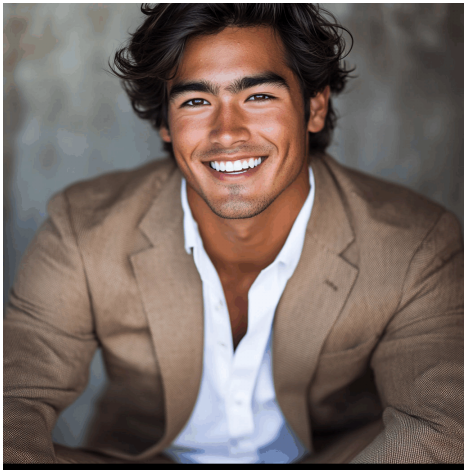
“I have read everything you have put out and have been patiently waiting for more. I love them all as they are all unique and different. Can't wait for more.(a thankful fan)”

“Just wanted you to know I loved all your books. Now, I am doing something I only do with my all time favorites. I am going back and reading them again. Thanks for sharing your gift. P.S. You are the real deal!”

“Hey McCartney~ Thanks so much for sending me "Dandelions Never Die." I absolutely loved it! As a fellow writer and "professional romance novel reader" I can honestly say you are truly gifted with writing talent. I've added you to the list of my favorite writers and I'm looking forward to reading another one of your books soon. Hugs!”


Grandmaster Eric Kino


Shelley Kino



Eric Kino III (Young Eric)



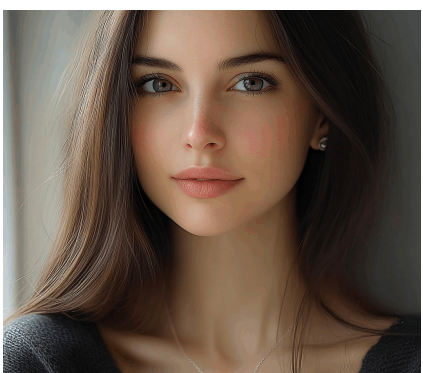
Jordan Brooks



Destiny (Desi) Copeland



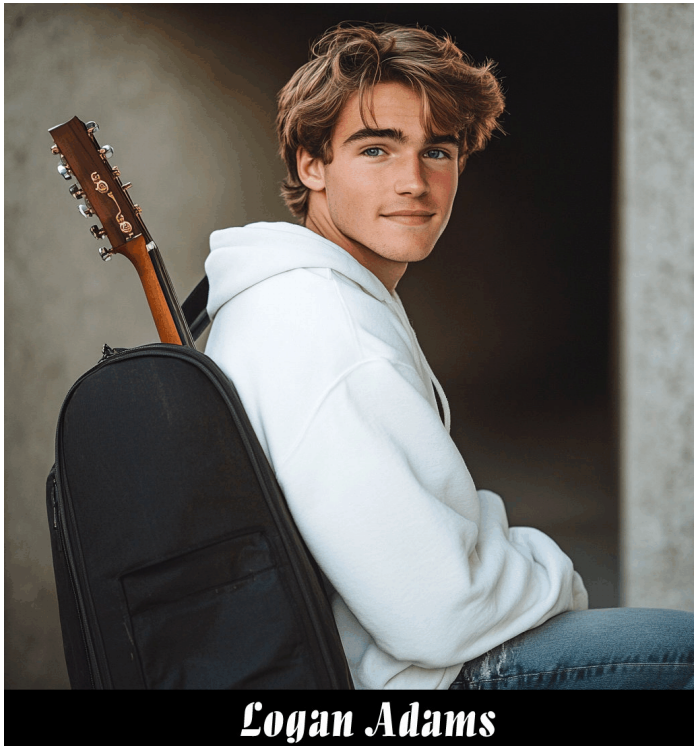
Alec Morgan



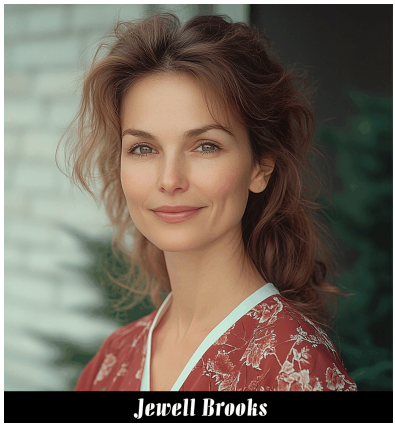
Breanna (Bree) Adams Kino



Ricky Kino


Logan Adams


Melody Keith


Jewell Brooks


Isla August @ Teenspotter.com


11
Phillip Keith
Lyle Keith


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

Continue with DND #12 Feed My Sheep - In Jesus' Name

Sneak Preview...

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."
Philippians 2:3-4

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

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

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

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

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

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

He lifted her right hand, and used it to stroke softly over his own

hand. "See? Stroke. Like you're making love. Stroke."

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

She smiled and nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She closed her eyes. Shook her head.

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

She shook her head and tears filled her eyes.

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

The scene switched again from the classroom to his apartment.

Only this time she could see the piano bench in his apartment overturned, see him forcing her into the bedroom, see him pushing her down onto his bed and she screamed.

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

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

Rose smiled at her and nodded. “You’re okay. It was a dream. You’re right here with me.”

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

“Daddy,” Violet said, her voice choking with emotion.

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

“Daddy,” she sobbed.

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

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

Continue the story in DND #12
Feed My Sheep-In Jesus’ Name

Free copies of all books are available at mccartneygreen.org

Questions or comments? I’d love to hear from you at mccartneygreen@gmail.com

;) Pi anyone?

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651328230664709384460955058223172535940812848111745028410270193852110555964462294895493038196442881097566593344612847564823378678316527120190914564856692346034861045432664821339360726024914127372458700660631558817488152092096282925409171536436789259036001133

God used pi to teach me that His universe is not random.

To the human eye, the decimal sequence of pi looks like total randomness—endless, chaotic digits spilling out into infinity without an obvious repeating cycle. People look at their own lives and trials the exact same way: "Why this tragedy? Why this random pain? It's all chaos!" But just like pi, God's universe is mathematically, divinely ordered to the infinite degree. Every single digit, every step, every trial is ***already known*** by the Creator. Placing pi at the end of the books isn't just a quirky signature—it's an eternal stamp declaring: "There is no chaos. God has done the math."