

DND #7

Warriors In Jesus' Name

McCartney Green

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

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"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand."

Ephesians 6:10-13

"Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love."

1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Keeping Tabs

It's early September and...

Eric Kino is 61
Shelley Adams Kino is about to be 56 in October
June Flower (Jeffy) Kino is 20

Ricky Kino is 43
Breanna Adams Kino just turned 40
Eric Kino III is 11
Taylor Kino is 8

Mark Adams is about to be 31
Little Joey Adams (JoJo) is 12

Joey Adams just turned 29

Jason Lee is 50
Angel Pritchard Lee is 47
Kimmie Lee is 18

Justin Lee is 58
Lori Lee is 44

Toby (Nash) Smith is 46
Caroline Jones Smith is 44
Grace Smith is 16
Brody Smith is 12

Chaz Stewart is 41
Lisa Lewis Stewart is 38
Melaynah Stewart is 11
Charles Stewart IV is 5
Matthew Stewart is 3

John Appel is 42
Jodi Appel is 40
Jacob Appel is 12

Maddie Lewis is 79

Keegan Tanner is 41
Lizzy Anderson Tanner is 34
Heather Anderson is 15
Rose and Violet Anderson are 14
Daisy and Lily Anderson are 13
Gabriel Tanner is 9

Jefferson Davis is 35
MacKenzie Daley Davis is 33
Daniel Davis just turned 4
Jeremy Davis is 3

Marissa Daley is 21

Cameron Wallace is about to be 22

"In a just cause the weak
o'ercome the strong."

Sophocles

Chapter One

Joey Adams streaked through the parking lot in his silver Ferrari, headed toward the back of the sleek, blue glass building. It wouldn't do for him to be late again, but darn it, he wasn't used to punching the clock. He was Ameritech Security's top agent. Highly trained. Highly skilled. Highly deadly. And this week, highly bored. He'd been forced by his own aspirations to work a month of eight to fives in the accounting department of the company that he would one day run: Ameritech Security.

He sighed heavily. An entire month in accounting. Thank goodness there was just one more week to go. Man, what he wouldn't give for a little action, a stakeout, a missing person, heck, even a bar fight. Yet, he knew he had to know the inside workings of the company and so he forced himself to exercise the patience he'd been taught by his stepfather, Eric Kino, a man for whom Joey had great respect. Besides, Joey wanted to make sure Jason Lee, the owner of Ameritech, never felt he'd made a mistake in choosing Joey as his successor. Yes, they were like family and yes, Joey was a logical choice, but he knew Jason wouldn't turn his company, his pride and joy, over to just anyone, family or no. Besides, even though Joey had called the man who was now his boss, Uncle Jason, for the first ten years he'd known him, they weren't really blood related. All that aside, it's Friday, Joey thought, certainly he could offer some assistance to some ongoing cases over the weekend.

He screeched to a halt as he swung toward his reserved space, stopping just inches from the shiny bumper of a dark blue Mercedes. He watched impatiently as the driver of the vehicle stepped out, closed the door and pointed her remote at it. His eyebrows rose as he waited for her to look his direction so he could point out the reserved parking sign that hung on the wall in front of her car like a beacon. Yet completely unaware, or possibly just ignoring him, she pointed her little turned-up nose toward the building entrance, dropped the keys in her purse, adjusted her sunglasses, turned her back and walked away.

As annoyed as he was, Joey couldn't help but appreciate the view from his angle. She wore a black skirt, black heels and a white silky blouse. And she wore it well. Shiny, black curls bounced around her shoulders as she walked toward the building's entrance, moving in rhythm to the bounce in her step. She definitely seemed to be a woman on a mission.

Pulling his eyes from the scenery, Joey searched for another parking space, as he focused his mind on business. He found an empty spot several rows back and headed in. Once he made it to the third floor where much of the company's internal workings took place, he drew a deep breath, forced a pleasant smile on his face and prepared himself mentally for the task at hand.

"Good morning, Mr. Adams!"

Joey turned to smile at the pretty, blonde who manned the front desk of accounting.

"Hi, Didi," he said as he tapped her desk with the palm of his hand. "And please, stop with the mister stuff. Just call me Joey. You make me feel old."

She giggled and Joey tried not to roll his eyes.

"Okay, Joey it is. So, Joey, I caught your movie last night."

"Really? Which one?" he asked, feigning interest.

"The one where Ricky Kino is accused of treason. Some friends and I vegged out at my sister's apartment. You were awesome."

Joey sighed. "Yeah, well, thanks. Listen, I'd better..."

"So, Joey, some of us are getting together for drinks tonight on the strip. Wanna join us?"

Not wanting to cause hurt feelings, he tried to ease his way into the turndown. His eyes sparkled at her. "Didi, are you sure you're even old enough to drink?"

"I'm twenty-two," she said indignantly. "You're not that much older, are you? Why don't you join us?"

"I'm twenty-nine, which means, when I was graduating high school, you were just starting middle school, but anyway, I can't join you because it would be against company policy."

"You mean, since you're the boss and all? Heck, that wouldn't bother me."

Joey sighed. "I'm flattered, Didi, but it would bother Mr. Lee. So, sorry, no can do. You have a great time though." He walked through

toward the manager's office, smiling as he thought of how some of the agents thought the girl's name fit her. He reprimanded himself as he turned his mind back to business.

"He's absolutely dreamy," Darla purred, joining Didi as they watched Joey walk away.

"He told me to call him by his first name." She heaved a sigh. "He is just too cute. Why in the world did he stop making movies and come to work here?"

Darla shrugged. "I read that he really hated the Hollywood scene."

"Yeah, well, lucky for us," Didi giggled. "Too bad he wouldn't come out with us tonight, though. I bet he's a lot of fun with a few drinks under his belt. Maybe he wouldn't be so willing to follow the rules."

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Bella turned over, groaning as she did. Her eyes fluttered open just enough to see the glowing numbers on the clock that sat on the expensive, antique, walnut table by her bed. Gasping, she sat straight up, tossing off the satin sheets and thick brocade spread. Logan would be late to school. Mindless of the aches and pains, she stumbled out of bed and ran down the hall.

Logan's door was open and Bella peered in. Her handsome, brown-haired, blue-eyed eleven-year-old was gathering his books and stuffing them into a backpack. Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, he glanced up toward the doorway and spotted her.

"I am so sorry, sweetie," Bella said softly. "I overslept."

"It's okay, Mom. I'm up."

"Well, at least let me fix you some breakfast. I think there's time," she said as she came toward him and tugged at a lock of hair that fell over his forehead.

He smiled at her, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Mom, uh..."

Bella smiled sweetly. "I'm okay, hon. Don't you worry about a thing. Everything's okay." She glanced down at her arms and saw the evidence spoke a different story. The bruises from the punishment doled out the night before were quite deep this time, the color a dark purple. Turning, she headed down the hall. "I'll just throw on some clothes and be right down."

Logan watched her go and had to blink back the moisture that gathered in his eyes.

"How about some French toast?" his mom called from her bedroom. "That's quick."

He drew a deep breath. "Sounds great. I'll go on down." He felt as if a giant lead weight was anchored to his chest. He felt as if he were drowning or suffocating and he wasn't sure just how much more he could take. Or rather how much more she could take. He headed toward the back stairway.

In the kitchen, Logan set his bookbag aside and pulled eggs from the fridge. When glass crunched under his Nike, he quickly grabbed the broom and dustpan and swept up the remains of a crystal goblet. No need to remind his mom of what had transpired the night before. He disposed of the shards of glass and pulled some bread from the pantry.

"Here, let me do it," Bella said cheerfully as she rushed into the kitchen and took the bread from his hands. "My baby needs to just sit down and let his momma pamper him a bit."

"I'm not a baby, Mom."

She moved over to kiss his cheek. "Oh, I know, sweetheart, but humor me, okay. The older you get, the older I get and believe me, this face can't afford to get any older."

"You're not old, Mom. You're, well, I mean, you're pretty."

"Oooh, thank you, baby, but I have eyes and a mirror, besides your father has pointed out many times that..."

"Well, he's wrong. He's just being mean, Mom. You *are* pretty."

Bella wrung her hands. "Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get you all upset."

"Mom, you didn't upset me. It's not you. You're not old and you're not ugly and you're not..." he tried to remember the word his father had used last night. Pathetic. "You're not pathetic."

Tears welled in her eyes.

"Aw, Mom, I'm sorry. Don't cry."

She sniffed and smiled. "It's okay. Come on, let's don't start the day out with depressing thoughts, all right? Grab the syrup out of the cabinet."

Logan did as she asked. While his mom chattered away and dipped bread into the egg mixture, he planted a smile on his face and did his best to hide the anger he felt. His mother was a really pretty lady. The guys at school said she was hot. He watched her as she cooked and tried to see what a man would see. She was slim, with long, straight,

black hair that she kept up in a ponytail most of the time. She had blue eyes and a pretty smile. She'd had him when she was only nineteen. She'd been just eight years older than he was now. Weird.

They lived in a huge house worth millions. He knew that from how many times his father bragged about it. The house had every state-of-the-art amenity, everything except a housekeeper. His mother was expected to keep the house spotless, which was what had started last night's fight. She'd served him iced tea in a glass with a spot on it. Just a freakin' spot. Logan didn't care that Gordon Landow was a big, fancy attorney. He didn't care that he was 'richer than God,' as he always said. And he didn't care that the man was his father. He hated him.

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"I have no problem, Miss Sheridan, offering you the kind of help you want or need," Jason said. "I just want to make sure you understand the cost involved. Our most common clients are large corporations, governments or high profile people."

"Like celebrities and politicians?" Breez asked acidly.

"Exactly. And what I mean by that is they have resources. Now, I can offer you a deal, if I deem the case worthy of one. In other words, if we have an equalizer type situation, we can and will work with you."

"Mr. Lee, I assure you money is no problem. My sister and I received a giant inheritance plus insurance money from our parents' accident. We're rolling in dough and I don't care what it costs, I want my sister safe."

Arms folded across his chest, Jason nodded thoughtfully. "I understand. Protecting your sister without her knowledge, however, will be tricky and walking a thin line between legalities."

"Well, I was told your company could work miracles. I was told you had no problem walking that thin line if the cause was honorable enough. I have more than enough money to pay your fee. Please, Mr. Lee, will you help me?"

Jason sighed, nodded his head and clicked some keys on his computer. "I think I can pull Agent Davis from the case he's..."

"Is this Agent Davis your top agent?"

Jason looked up, his brows raised. "Close to the very top."

"May I have your top agent, please?"

"Ms. Sheridan..."

"You said this would be tricky."

Jason nodded. "Yes, I did. I said it was tricky, but doable."

"Please, Mr. Lee, your best agent. Your top agent."

Jason smiled. This woman was a fireball and therefore, there was one agent who deserved to have to deal with her. "Very well, Miss Sheridan, I'm going to assign my *top* agent to your case. He'll investigate the situation and use his own discretion as to what should be done and how to proceed."

Breez Sheridan watched as Jason Lee, owner of Ameritech Security, lifted the phone receiver. She'd been told he was the best and that hiring his company was like hiring your own FBI department. He was an attractive man. Korean, one of the women at the club had said. Good looking but married. He was larger than she'd pictured him. She'd thought of a tiny little Asian, computer geek looking dude, yet when Jason Lee had risen to shake her hand he'd towered over her. He appeared very calm, self-assured, masculine, yet kind. Sure, she thought, all the good ones are taken. She was pleased with the services he'd described Ameritech could provide, but right now, her brows rose as she listened to the words he spoke into the phone.

"Mina, get Joey on the phone. He's down in accounting."

Jason hung up the phone and smiled at Breez whose expression conveyed her indignation. "Is there a problem?" he asked.

She rose. "Mr. Lee, I was told your company was the best and that you were all about integrity. And I told you money was no object. I asked for your best and now you see fit to send me some clerk from your accounting department? I feel insulted and wonder if I should take my business elsewhere."

Jason smiled calmly. "Ms. Sheridan, I realize how that must've sounded and you are most certainly *welcome* to take your business elsewhere, though I wish you luck with that. I suggest, however, you not jump to conclusions just yet. I assure you Joey Adams is the best. He was down in accounting learning how this company runs because one day, when I retire, he'll run it."

Breez's face reddened. "Oh." She gave a small shrug. "Well, I guess I really put my foot in my mouth. Sorry that I misunderstood."

"Not a problem," Jason said. "Miscommunications happen all the time. World-wide problem. Civilizations lost," he added with a smile.

The phone rang and Jason picked it up. "Hey Joe, how would you

like a reprieve from accounting?...That's what I thought...I'll need you up here to meet with a client ASAP."

Replacing the receiver, Jason smiled at Breez. "He's on his way. May I offer you something to drink?"

"Just some water would be fine."

After handing her a half-sized bottle of cold water from his personal fridge, Jason sat behind his desk, his fingers steepled, as they waited. Breez offered a few more apologies for the misunderstanding which Jason brushed aside. It wasn't long before Joey knocked and stepped through the door.

Joey immediately recognized the woman as the one who'd taken his parking space. Trying not to make any snap judgments about her, he smiled and offered his hand.

Jason made the introductions. "Breez Sheridan, I'd like you to meet Agent Adams, my right-hand man."

"Ms. Sheridan," Joey said, his voice softening at the confused look on her face. "Is something wrong?"

"No, I, uh, I just thought you'd be older. And you look familiar. Actually, you look like the guy who fights in the Kino Challenges with Ricky Kino."

"Actually, Rick doesn't fight anymore," Joey said with a grin. "But you got it right. That's me."

"Oh, well, that's impressive."

Joey shook his head. "It's not that big a deal because we're not really trying to kill each other, well, except maybe for that big guy two years ago."

Jason laughed. "Yeah, I think he had it in for ya, Joe. Thank goodness he ran out of steam."

"But I thought Joey Adams is, I mean, you're an actor. I've seen your movies."

"What all three of them?" Joey laughed. "It turned out acting wasn't my passion. This," he said as he swept his arms around the luxurious office, "is."

Jason smiled. "It seems Joey likes real danger instead of the fake movie kind."

"So, what are we looking at?" Joey asked.

"Miss Sheridan needs someone to protect her sister."

"As in a bodyguard?"

"Yes and no," Breez said quickly. "Please let me explain. I believe my sister, Bella Landow, is being abused by her husband. She won't admit to it. I don't know why. Pride or embarrassment I guess. Anyway, she tries to hide it and covers fairly well, but I know her, Agent Adams. I see the fear in her eyes. I've tried to tell her she doesn't have to take it. She doesn't deserve to hurt. Not physically and not emotionally. She's a sweet girl, but she's stubborn. Her husband, Gordon Landow, is a powerful man and I think she's terrified to cross him."

"Gordon Landow, the attorney?" Jason asked.

"Yes. You know him?"

"Who's Gordon Landow?" Joey asked.

"Big, powerful attorney," Jason answered. "Justin knows him, has dealt with him and doesn't have anything good to say about him."

"Who's Justin?" Breez asked Jason.

"My brother. He's also an attorney, as is Joey's brother Mark."

Breez nodded. "Well, your brother is correct in his assessment of Gordon. He's a real jerk."

Joey grinned. He liked the lady's boldness.

"I hate him. I've thought several times I'll just go ahead and arrange to have him killed."

Both men's brows shot up.

Breez smiled wickedly, waved her hand in the air. "Oh, don't go gettin' your panties in a wad, it's just a fantasy. I'm too chicken to go that far."

"Somehow, I doubt that," Joey murmured. "So, how long has this been going on?"

She shook her head. "Too long. They've been married twelve years. At first, everything was okay, at least I think it was. Then I started to notice him speaking harshly to her at family gatherings. Then I saw her less and less. They stopped coming to my parents' house for Christmas. Bella stopped calling me. Now, the only time I see her is when I absolutely insist on a shopping trip or lunch."

"So, what exactly is it you want me to do?" Joey asked.

Breez bit her lip. "I want you to do everything you can to protect my sister without her knowing she's being protected."

Joey's eyes shifted to Jason and back to Breez, his eyebrows lifted.

"Look, I know it sounds like a crazy thing to be asking, but she

won't admit to the abuse and if someone doesn't do something to protect her, I'm afraid one day he'll end up killing her. She would be mortified and probably very angry to know I have someone looking after her, but I've been told if anyone could pull it off, it would be this agency. Mr. Lee says you're his top man, so Agent Joey Adams, if you can't handle it, just say so, and stop wasting my time."

The woman looked soft and pretty, but she was hard as nails. Joey shrugged, ignoring her barb. "From what you say, I think our main focus should be on gathering enough evidence against her husband so that she feels confident enough that she can get out of the situation. I can tail her. I can set up cameras and audio inside the home."

"But you can't protect her?"

"I can protect her, but only to a certain degree while she's inside the home. First, I'll want a key to the house to make it easier to get in, and I have to tell you, if he goes after her behind closed doors, I won't stand idly by. I will have to intervene which would mean the end of your little covert operation."

"But if that happened, you'd have proof, right? You'd have the proof that he hurt her."

"Yes, and that may or may not be admissible in court."

"Given the power Gordon Landow wields, it'd have to be pretty powerful evidence, pretty violent, to be admitted," Jason explained. "Because there is no permission for cameras, and Cali is an All-Party Consent state."

Breez's hands trembled. "I think it's already gotten pretty violent. I'm terrified he's gonna kill her."

"As long as I'm nearby it won't get that far," Joey assured her.

She looked him over. "You're pretty sure of yourself."

He blinked. "Yes, ma'am, I am. I have to be. Second-guessing will get a body killed."

Her eyes ran up and down, looking him over, before she nodded. "Okay, then. So, I guess that means you'll help me?"

"If Jason didn't think we could do something to help he wouldn't have called me up here, but you need to understand that protecting her is just the first part. Obviously, I can only do that for so long. The plan will be to gather the evidence we need to extract your sister cleanly from her situation. I have to say, it's difficult to save someone who doesn't want to be saved."

"She wants it. She just doesn't think there's any safe way out."

"That's what we'll try to provide and in the meantime, I'll protect her any way possible, but how long we go without her knowing remains to be seen."

"Understood," Breez said, then began to chew on her lip. "Oh, there's one more thing."

Joey raised his brows in question.

"Bella has a son. Logan. He's eleven."

Joey sighed.

"Has Logan been a victim of his father's physical abuse, as far as you know?" Jason asked.

"Not as far as I know. I just wanted Agent Adams to know there would be another person in the home."

"What about housekeepers, maids and the like?"

"No. Gordon insists Bella keep the house up herself."

"Do Bella and you have any other siblings?" Jason asked.

"No. It's just us two."

"How much younger is she than you?" Joey asked.

Breez's eyebrows rose slightly. "I'm four years younger than her."

Joey smiled as if the insult amused him. "Sorry. I just assumed."

"It's okay. Sometimes I feel like the older sister. She married young and had Logan right away. She never really had a chance to find herself, and so she seems very young and very innocent. She needs protection. He keeps her down, constantly ridiculing her, and he tries to keep her isolated, but I give him hell about that."

"And has he ever threatened you?" Joey asked.

"He wouldn't dare. I'm not afraid of him and he knows it."

Joey's lips pressed together. "Okay, well, do me a favor and back off. I don't want you in the mix."

Her eyes narrowed in anger.

Joey stood his ground without saying a word.

She finally capitulated. "Fine." She rose and walked toward the door. "There's a formal dinner tomorrow night at the Governor's mansion that Bella and Gordon and I will be attending. You might want to procure a tux. Unless you don't think you can finagle an invitation."

"That won't be a problem. What time shall I pick you up?"

"What?"

"I think we should go together. I've just decided that's how I'll explain my presence. I'm your new boyfriend."

Breez sniffed. "She'll see right through that."

"Oh really? Why's that?" Joey asked with a smile.

Breez tilted her nose up in the air. "You're not my type."

Joey grinned, admiring the way her blue eyes flashed beneath the velvety dark lashes. "We'll just see about that. So, what time?"

"I'll *meet you* there at seven."

Joey nodded. "Have it your way. I'll see you at seven."

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Bella's heart beat faster and she could barely catch her breath. Bella knew it wasn't because of the workout she was receiving in her martial arts class, but because of the instructor who'd decided to stop right in front of her to correct her movement. She had no right to be attracted to him. Yet, whenever he came near, her body and heart thought along other lines. She was a married woman with a son, but her husband had never made her feel like this man did; important, a person of worth, safe.

How silly of her to be attracted to a man whom she barely knew and who probably wouldn't even recognize her on the street. She and Logan had been taking martial arts classes at the Kino studio for almost two years now. Master Mark, as they called him to show respect, was Grandmaster Kino's stepson. He was a 5th degree black belt who taught only on Saturday mornings. Even though he always acknowledged her, they'd never really had a conversation. Admittedly, he'd tried a few times during their open houses and demonstrations, but she'd always shied away.

She was sure his kind treatment of her was simply professional courtesy. In her mind, she knew that, but in her heart, her imagination took over. What would it be like to have such a strong, gentle man interested in her? He'd smile at her, speak softly to her. He'd probably open doors for her and carry groceries in from the car for her.

He was large. Several inches taller than her husband. Her husband, she thought, was a complete opposite of this man. Gordon had blond hair and blue eyes. Her instructor had brown hair and large brown eyes and a kind smile that would put anyone at ease. He had broad shoulders and narrow hips. She'd seen him change from his t-shirt into his uniform top and knew he was ripped with muscle. Another student told

her he'd been some big-time football player in college and would've gone pro except for a knee injury that had taken too long to rehabilitate.

"Ms. Bella?" he said softly. "Am I confusing you?"

She blinked, looked up into his eyes. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

His brow wrinkled. "I said to keep the fist closed, like this," he replied, grasping her hand and folding it into a fist. He held her hand up in the air, over her head. "Tighten your elbow and shoulder. Good. Now, as I strike, you thrust sideways to block, using my momentum against me. Good. See the difference?"

He struck slowly toward her face, coaching her through the block. Then went low, forcing her to throw a low block.

"Good. Now, high again."

He came in much faster this time and she thrust out her forearm against his fist.

Before she could stop herself, she gave a small cry of pain and jumped back, holding her forearm.

"You okay?" Mark asked. Grasping her wrist, he raised her arm. The sleeve of the uniform she wore fell back, revealing several bruises along her forearm. Mark's brow furrowed as Bella jerked her arm away.

His solemn eyes met hers and she smiled timidly. "Uh, Logan and me, we've been practicing a little too much."

He smiled at her, putting her immediately at ease. "I'd say. I think the two of you need to back off a little."

She nodded. "Yes, sir, Master Mark."

He bowed slightly and moved on to work with the next student while one of the class black belts led them through their motions. Bella blew out a breath as she watched Master Mark walk down the row, relieved, for more than one reason, to have him move away. Her eye caught her son's. Logan stood two rows up from her, a look of unease on his young, eleven-year-old face. She gave him a stiff smile and went on with the class.

Thirty minutes later, dripping with perspiration, Bella headed to the locker room to change into her street clothes. Logan sat on the floor pulling on his shoes and watched her go, fighting the feeling of dread that always crept into his heart when it came time to go home.

"Hey."

Logan turned his head to acknowledge JoJo, who was Master Mark's son. They called him JoJo because his real name was Joseph, and they didn't use 'Joey' because that was also his uncle's nickname. To keep the confusion down he'd been dubbed Little Joe which he hated so that morphed into JoJo. Logan thought JoJo was cool because he was only twelve and already a black belt. Logan liked him because he wasn't cocky. He seemed pretty ordinary despite the fact that his family was famous. Logan didn't speak but nodded his head.

"That was some pretty good sparring you did today," JoJo said.

"Thanks."

"You excited about testing for your red belt next Saturday?"

"Yeah, I guess."

JoJo eased down beside him. "So, Logan, like, we're having a belt party at my grandparents' house after the test. We're all gonna play on the beach and sleep over and stuff. There's about twenty kids coming, but the girls can't spend the night. Anyway, I hope you can come."

Logan's jaw clenched. He didn't know what to say because he knew his father didn't like him being away from home.

"Come where?" his mom asked as she walked up.

"Hi, Mrs. Landow. We're having a belt party next Saturday. Can Logan come?"

Bella glanced down at her son, catching a brief glimpse of the hopeful look in his eyes before he was able to hide it. "Of course he can come. Sounds like fun."

"It's a spend the night party," Logan added.

Bella frowned, wrung her hands. "Oh. Well, I'm not sure about the spending the night part, but he can come for the evening. What time?"

Before JoJo could answer, his father joined them and answered for him. "We'll get started right after the testing so we'll go straight there from here." He turned toward Bella. "You're invited too."

"Me?" Bella said nervously.

"Sure. You're part of the class, even though you're not testing. We promise we won't make you spend the night."

Bella laughed nervously. "Okay, well, I'm not sure how long I can stay. I'd better check with Gordon to see what he has planned first."

"I understand. Why don't you ask Gordon to come along?"

"Sure. I'll do that," Bella said smoothly, knowing her husband would never agree to come and not wanting him to anyway.

"Just a sec," Mark said. He hurried to his desk and grabbed a couple business cards. "Here. One for each of you. In case you need to ask any questions about the test or the party. Probably better to try my cell first. Don't want you to get lost in the shuffle if you call the office."

Bella fingered the glossy card and read the top line: *Mark Adams, Attorney at Law*, *Criminal Defense*. "Okay. Thanks. Well, we'd better get home. I have some fancy dinner I'm supposed to attend tonight and it will take me hours to get presentable."

Mark's eyes quickly moved over her, taking in the blue eyes fringed by dark lashes, the flawless complexion, the soft, black hair. "I doubt that," he said softly before he gave himself a mental shake. "Well, have a great time. And call me if you need to, about anything." He eyed Logan. "Even if you just need to talk."

"Thanks," Bella said as her cell phone went off. "Oh, excuse me."

Mark watched her glance at the number before she turned away and answered, her teeth biting down on her full lower lip. His gut involuntarily reacted to the sight.

"Hello? Oh—oh dear. I, I'm not sure. No, of course I understand. Please, don't think another thing about it. I'll figure something out. Okay, and tell Bill to get well soon." Sighing, she ended the call.

"Is there a problem?" Mark asked, knowing it was none of his business but not being able to help himself. She'd been his student for two years and she'd made very little progress. She didn't seem to have it in her. She was the most gentle soul he'd ever met and over the years he'd found himself thinking about her at odd times. There was just something about her that intrigued him, more than the obvious delicate beauty. He had to constantly remind himself that she was married.

Bella put a hand to her forehead almost in a panic. "Logan was gonna stay at a friend's house tonight while Gordon and I attend an important dinner at the governor's mansion." She glanced at her son. "Logan, Barrett's dad has the flu. I don't know what I'm gonna do. Your father will not be happy about this."

Mark could've sworn Logan's face turned three shades paler.

"Uh, it's okay, Mom. I'm old enough to stay home by myself."

"Oh, honey, I know you are, but you know how your father is so, um, protective."

When Logan didn't answer, Mark smiled at Bella. "Why don't you

let Logan come out with us. JoJo and my nephew, Eric, and I are going for a man's night out. You know, pizza and a movie."

Bella wrung her hands. "Oh, I don't know."

"Please, Mrs. Landow," JoJo pled.

"Logan?" Bella asked.

"That'd be great, Mom."

"I promise to have him home before midnight and if you and Gordon are still out we'll stick around until you get home."

"I don't want you to go to any trouble," Bella said.

"It won't be any trouble at all. We'll have a blast."

Logan looked hopefully at his mom.

"Well, I guess it will be all right."

"Great," Mark said immediately. "We'll come pick him up around six. Will that be early enough?"

"Uh, yes, that would be perfect."

"Okay, then it's settled. We'll be seeing you tonight," Mark said pointedly to Logan. He stepped back and nodded at his own son. "We'd better get a move on, JoJo." He gave both Logan and Bella a slight bow.

They returned the gesture and started out as Mark watched. On a whim, Mark called Logan back. The boy turned and trotted back toward his instructor.

"Yes, sir?"

Mark smiled at him. "So, I just wanted to remind you to back off your mom."

Perplexed, Logan's brow creased. Did Master Mark know about the beatings his mother had endured? Did he think that Logan himself had caused the damage? His heart began to pound in his chest. He glanced over his shoulder at his mom, then fearfully back toward Master Mark, who strangely, was smiling.

"Your training," Mark said. "Your mom said the two of you have been training hard, sparring against each other. Sometimes young guys your age don't realize their own strength. Her arms are getting a little bruised. She wouldn't tell you that, but I thought you'd want to know."

"Oh, uh, thank you, sir," Logan mumbled.

Mark ruffled his hair. "No problem. See you later."

"Yes, sir."

"See ya," JoJo added.

Logan turned and hurried off.

JoJo looked up at his father's concerned face. They were close, his father and he. Joe had been born nine months after his father's eighteenth birthday. His mother had died a few weeks later. He'd been raised by his dad with the help of his grandparents. Now it seemed they were more like best friends sometimes, rather than father and son. "So, Dad, you don't really think Logan is the one who put bruises on his mom's arm, do you?"

Mark sighed and smiled down at his son. At twelve years of age, he was pretty astute about life. "No, son, I don't. I was just feeling him out. The question is, what the heck am I gonna do about it?"

JoJo smiled. "You'll think of something. You always do."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

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"You've been in there long enough." Gordon slammed his hand against the locked door.

Flinching, Bella flicked her big toe to let the water drain from the tub. "I'm coming."

"You wanna tell me why you locked the door?"

Bella swallowed hard. "Oh, did I lock it? I hadn't realized." Rising, she quickly wrapped a towel around her and unlocked the door.

Gordon stood in the doorway, glaring. "You know you locked it. Like I haven't seen it all before." He glanced down at the wet skin above the towel and frowned. "You're losing weight."

She gave a practiced laugh. "I wish."

"You don't need to lose weight, Bella. People will think you have an eating disorder."

She didn't know how to respond so she gave a smile and went to move past him, but he didn't move aside. Trying to keep the fear from her eyes, she peered up into his face. It was times like these, when she couldn't tell what his mood was, that were the hardest on her psyche. "I, um, I need to get dressed," she said, her voice slightly shaking.

"Not yet."

Bella turned to make sure the door to their bedroom was closed. "We really don't have time for this, Gordon."

He wrapped his steely fingers around her upper arms. "Don't tell me what I have time for."

"It's just that I know you don't like to be late," she said softly.

"We won't be late. You'll just have to hurry."

She nodded as an errant tear slid down her cheek.

"Why are you crying?" Fury crossed his features. "Stop it. You're such a little drama queen. You make me sick."

Bella closed her eyes and pretended to be far away as he did what he wanted to do.

✞✞✞

Ephesians 5:25-28

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself."

Chapter Two

"I'll get it," Bella called when the doorbell sounded. Smoothing her dress, she opened the door. "Hi," she said, somewhat breathless. "Please come in."

Mark stood dumbfounded, his eyes traveling over his student, taking in the knee-length black dress, the pale skin of her cleavage, the high heels, the gorgeous legs, the diamonds glittering at her ears and throat, the tendrils of straight black hair that fell softly around her heart-shaped face and the tiny pink tongue that licked her lips nervously.

"Dad," JoJo said, nudging his father.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Wow, Bella, you look amazing."

He watched as her face turned a lovely shade of pink and she glanced uneasily over her shoulder.

She turned back to him. "Thank you, Master Mark."

"Mark. We're not in class so just call me Mark."

"Yes, sir," she said automatically.

He smiled. "We're gonna have to work on that."

"Please come in, I'll get Logan. He's probably in the kitchen."

"Thanks."

Mark and JoJo stepped inside. Bella closed the front door, turned and dashed toward the kitchen. Mark took advantage of the opportunity to look around. The house was old money. Traditional foyer, giant sweeping staircase. All the heavy wood doors that opened out on the foyer area were closed at this moment. A large painting of Gordon and Logan hung over a huge, antique table opposite the stairs. Bella's presence in the picture was noticeably missing. The table bore a bowl of fruit, two gold candlesticks and a leather-bound box.

"Nice place, huh?" Mark said softly to his son.

"Hmm, no fun," JoJo replied.

"Whaddya mean?"

"You know, Dad. No fun."

Mark looked again. "Yeah, I get ya, pal."

Logan came from the back of the house, wearing a smile.

"Hey, Logan!" JoJo said.

"Hey."

"You ready?" Mark asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Did your nephew not come?" Bella asked.

"He's in the car."

"Oh. Okay, well, you guys have fun."

"Bye, Mom," Logan said, kissing her cheek.

"Bye, sweetie," she said and then sighed. "So, do me a favor and real quick, run upstairs and tell your father you're leaving."

He looked up the steps, then back to his mother as if to protest. Their eyes met. Reluctantly, Logan went upstairs.

Mark's eyes were drawn immediately back to Bella. "Did I tell you how nice you look?"

Bella actually giggled. The sound took Mark's breath away. He just realized, he'd never seen nor heard her laugh. Wondering what was happening to him and trying to control the pounding of his heart, he grinned at her.

"Yes, you did," Bella answered. "Did I say thank you?"

"I have no idea."

She giggled again.

"Well, I'm glad someone can make my wife smile," Gordon said as he came down the steps, smiling at Mark, Logan trailing behind. He held out his hand and Mark stepped forward and shook it.

"Hello, Gordon."

"It's been some time, hasn't it?" Gordon asked.

"I think it was the Bar Association dinner held in honor of Judge Mullins this past January," Mark answered.

"Ah, yes, that was it. As a matter of fact, I think I remember you had just passed the bar exam."

"Actually, it's been a year since I passed the exam."

"And you have a little practice going?"

"Not yet, for now I'm with the law firm of Lee, Baker and Todd."

"Hmm, oh, yes, Justin Lee. It's nice that you have friends to give you a foothold."

"Absolutely," Mark agreed, ignoring the barb. "Justin is like

family and I'm happy to be there with his firm, learning from the best."

Gordon's eyes narrowed only slightly, but Mark knew he'd hit home. Glancing at Bella though, Mark felt immediately contrite. Her eyes were wide open in fear, her face pale. Behind her though, Logan was smiling.

Gordon followed Mark's eyes to his wife. He draped his arm heavily and possessively about her shoulders. "Well, Bella and I are grateful that you would stoop to babysitting while we go hobnob with the Governor."

"No problem. Logan is a fine young man and I'm honored to be able to help out. Besides, JoJo gets tired of trying to keep the old man occupied, I'm sure."

"I recommend marriage," Gordon said, allowing his hand to slide down Bella's back to rest on her hip.

Mark saw Bella blanch. He pretended he didn't notice. Instead he smiled. "Haven't found a woman who would have me." He extended his hand. "Well, the boys and I will get out of your hair. Ready Logan?"

"Yes, sir."

Gordon shook his hand once more and admonished his son to behave. As they made their way out to the car, both Mark and Logan looked back over their shoulders. They didn't realize they were both having the same thoughts.

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"Well, well, well, Agent Adams, I have to say, you clean up nicely," Breez said as Joey Adams approached from the stairwell.

He smiled, strode right up to her, took both her hands and looked her over. "Ms. Sheridan, you are one gorgeous woman."

"Flattery, Agent Adams," she whispered, "will get you nowhere."

He frowned. "I'll keep that in mind. And call me Joey." He stepped closer, pushing her back against the wall.

"What are you...?"

"Trust me," he said just before he lowered his mouth to hers.

Breez gasped. She struggled against him, then stilled when she heard Bella's voice.

"Breez? Is that you?"

Joey let her go and turned as if he were a kid caught with his hands in the cookie jar.

Bella and Gordon stood side by side, staring at them.

"Uh, hi, Bella," Breez said, shakily. She nodded toward Bella's husband. "Gordon."

"Breez," Gordon said, his eyebrows raised haughtily.

"Uh, this is Joey Adams, a, well, a friend of mine."

"Oh, come on now, Breez, you said you were gonna tell your sister," Joey said with a smile.

"Tell me what?"

"Uh, Joey and me, I mean, we're like together."

"Joey's your date?"

"I think it's progressed a little further than that," Gordon offered.

Joey grinned. "I've heard you were sharp."

"Joey Adams, the actor?" Gordon asked.

"That's me."

"Aren't you Mark Adams' brother?" Bella queried.

"Yes. You know him?"

"He teaches the Saturday martial arts class that Logan and I take. He's actually watching Logan for us tonight. Our babysitter fell through." Bella gave a short laugh. "This is such a strange coincidence."

"Yes, it is," Gordon said. "It is indeed a small world. How long have you two been an item?"

"Oh, only a few weeks," Breez said quickly.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me," Bella chided.

Joey shrugged. "We were making sure it was gonna really happen before we let others in on our feelings."

"Oh, then I guess I should ask, what are your feelings?" Bella said, unable to control her curiosity.

"That's hardly your business," Gordon answered.

"That's okay, I don't mind answering," Joey began, "because Breez and I, we, well, there's no other way to put it, we think we're in love." Joey grinned at Breez's sharply indrawn breath.

"How nice. Well, we don't want to be late," Gordon said, taking Bella's arm and pulling her toward the large dining hall.

Joey watched them leave. Breez jerked on his arm to give him a piece of her mind but he already had his phone to his ear.

"It's all clear. You have a few hours. Don't mess it up...no, I'll handle the car they're in, you just get the others."

Pocketing the phone, he looked up at Breez who stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"Other agents, moving in to plant the cameras, microphones and other tracing equipment in their home, phone and cars."

"Oh." That knocked some of the steam out of her but she pulled in another breath. "What do you think you were doing back there?"

His face registered innocence. "What do you mean? Are you talking about when I kissed you?"

"You know good and well that's what I'm talking about."

A wide smile covered his face. "I was doin' my job, and it doesn't suck." He grabbed her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. "Come on, I want to keep an eye on the happy couple."

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Logan laughed so hard his soda almost came out of his nose. He choked, while young Eric and JoJo took turns slapping him on the back, themselves not able to stop laughing.

Finally, having regained their composure, Eric went on with his story. "I never even had to step in, which was a good thing because my father would have my a...uh, butt." He looked quickly up at his uncle. "Oh, uh, sorry, Uncle Mark."

Mark laughed. "Yeah, I bet. I'm gonna go order another pizza. Be right back."

"Dad, that is so lame," JoJo said. "You could order from our waitress. You don't have to go to the counter. We all know you're gonna hit on that lady up there."

"Do you? Well now, I'm sorry to be so transparent." He stood and made his way to the counter.

"Your dad is cool," Logan said.

"Yeah, he's okay."

"Do you and him do stuff like this a lot?"

"When he has time. If he has a big case I hardly ever see him. You know what that's like. Dad says your father has one of the biggest law firms in the state." JoJo glanced at his cousin Eric as he made this statement. He'd already discussed his suspicions with him. Eric was not only his cousin but also his closest friend in the world—besides his dad. JoJo and Eric had decided it would be good to get Logan to open up about his father.

"Yeah, whatever." Logan turned his attention to Eric. "So, what's it like living with your mom and dad? I mean, Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams, it must be like, totally awesome to live with two famous movie stars, huh?"

Eric smoothed his black hair back from his forehead and sighed. "I don't think of them as anything other than just my parents. I mean to me, they're just, you know, people. Though, as people go, you know, they're like, pretty cool. But let's don't talk about them, let's talk about the girls that just sat down over there." Eric grinned. "There's three of them. One for each of us."

"I'll take the blonde," JoJo said quickly.

"I get red," Logan said, proud that he'd had the guts to speak up.

"I guess I get the other one, then," Eric said cheerfully.

"The fat one," JoJo laughed.

"That's not fat," Logan said, gripping his chest as if he had breasts.

They burst out laughing again. JoJo patted Logan on the back to let him know that was a good one. Logan smiled. It felt good to forget about home and have friends for a little while. Being an only child had never been a good thing as far as he was concerned. Then again, he was glad there was no one else in his house to have to deal with his father. What would it be like to have Ricky Kino or Master Mark as a father? He shook his head. Even trying to imagine it caused his heart to ache.

Even though his father had never hit him, he made it very obvious that he thought of Logan as a burden he'd rather not deal with. Logan hated the man. Mostly because he was so mean to his mom. He yelled at her, pushed her, strangled her and slapped her. A few times he'd actually punched her like you would punch another man, like with a fist. And they didn't know Logan knew that his father did other things to her too. Horrible things. He swallowed and took a giant gulp of his soda.

"I still love *Grand Theft Auto*," JoJo was saying. "But *Call of Duty* is always good. What's your all-time favorite game, Logan?"

Logan shrugged. "Gotta go back to *Fortnite*."

"Yeah," JoJo and Eric both agreed at the same time.

"Hey, look, Eric," JoJo said. "Your girl there is going over to the jukebox."

Eric grinned. "Guess that means I'm up to bat." He stood and tugged at his t-shirt, then walked toward the unsuspecting girl.

"So, you okay, Logan?" JoJo asked, once Eric was gone.

Logan gave a small smile and nodded. "Yeah, I'm good."

JoJo waited, unsure if he should say what he'd planned to say. Oh well, he thought, here goes. "Listen, Logan, I, uh, know we don't spend too much time together or anything, but, I mean, you ever want to get together, do stuff, or like, talk about stuff, you know, well, I mean, I'm your man, ya know?"

Logan eyed JoJo. He was thinking that JoJo and him could pass for brothers. JoJo was a year older and a little taller. They had about the same color brown hair. But JoJo's eyes were brown and Logan's were blue like both his mom and dad.

"Hey, look, I didn't mean to like..."

"No, it's cool," Logan said quickly. He took out his cell phone. "What's your number?"

Just as Logan finished putting the number in his phone, they were interrupted by the blond member of the female trio they'd spotted earlier.

"Hi."

Logan and JoJo both turned eyes up to see a pretty blonde, batting her eyelashes. Since it was the blonde, and JoJo had already claimed her, Logan leaned back to watch.

"Hi," JoJo said. "How's it going?"

"Good. I was just wondering if one of y'all would like to go over and play some skee ball with me."

"Y'all? You're not from around here, are you?"

Smiling, she shook her head, causing her hair to fall forward over her face. She brushed it back with her hand. "No. My family just moved here from Tennessee."

"Wow, so how do you like it here?"

"It's okay, but it's hard to make new friends."

JoJo stood. "Well, you seem to be doing all right. I'm JoJo." He held out his hand.

She smiled. "Hey, JoJo, I'm Mandy."

"Nice to meet you," he said confidently and then motioned down toward Logan. "And this is Logan."

She smiled sweetly. "Hey."

"Hi," Logan said.

"Well, you wanna go play some skee ball?" JoJo asked her.

"Sure."

They walked away. JoJo looked back over his shoulder with a big grin and Logan gave him a thumbs up.

Logan watched them walk away, then glanced over at the table where the redhead remained, sitting with a man and woman. He caught her eye and she immediately looked down toward her lap. Great. He had to pick the shy one.

"Business slow?" Mark asked as he came back to the table.

Logan shrugged. "I guess."

Mark peered over at the girl and back to Logan. "You may have to make the first move."

"Maybe. What time is the movie?"

"Starts at nine-thirty. You've got plenty of time."

"I might go over in a minute," Logan said.

Mark nodded. "I was really shy when I was your age. Actually, I think I still am."

Logan looked up into his eyes. "Really?"

"Sure."

Logan shook his head. "You didn't seem shy when you went to talk to that lady at the counter."

"Well, it's taken years of practice to be able to do that. And after mustering all that courage, she still turned me down."

"Oh."

"But that's cool. I think I can handle it. I mean, what's the worst that could happen, huh? Stings the ego a bit is all. It's not so bad."

"Yeah, I guess not," Logan said. "I never thought of it that way."

Mark wondered if Gordon ever took the time to talk to his son. He doubted it. The few times he'd met Gordon he seemed egocentric and probably narcissistic. "So, are you excited about your belt test?"

Logan nodded. "Maybe."

"Maybe? Are you nervous?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well, don't be. I don't usually say this to someone who's about to test, but you're one of the best in the class, Logan. You're a natural."

"Do ya really think so?"

"As we've talked about in class, Logan, I believe in always being honest, so, I wouldn't say it unless I meant it. You keep coming to class and working hard, you'll be a black belt before you know it. Now, your

mom, she's another story."

Logan smiled. "Yeah, I guess she's a little uncoordinated."

Mark grinned. "Well, she tries hard and that's all that counts. She'll eventually get it. It just won't be as fast as you."

Logan's smile disappeared. "Yeah, so I guess that means I'll need to protect her until she can protect herself."

Mark sighed. He didn't want to push too hard, too fast, but he had a feeling Bella Landow definitely needed protection, but not the kind her eleven-year-old son could provide. The signs were too obvious for him to ignore and he needed to speak with her. He needed to tell her that she *could* remove herself from the situation. He could give her the means and the knowledge. He could boost her courage. He could hopefully talk some sense into her. However, he couldn't do it for her. The thought of Gordon putting those bruises on her made him want to tear the guy apart. Bella was so meek, so delicate, ultimate femininity. How could anyone want to hurt her? He looked at the earnest young man across from him. "Logan, about your mom. Does..."

"You need to come quick. Please, come quick!"

Mark and Logan turned as one. The hysterical voice came from Mandy, the little blonde who'd gone off with JoJo. She slapped her hand on the table and ran off. Mark never questioned her. He rose and ran after her. Logan followed right behind. The girl led them out the door into the parking lot where a crowd of kids gathered at the far end. They broke through the crowd to find JoJo engrossed in battle against two larger kids and young Eric lying on the asphalt unconscious, a girl leaning over him.

"Ah hell," Mark said. "Someone call 911," he barked. "Tell them we need police and ambulance." He dove into the battle, grabbing up the two older kids, his large steely hands wrapped around each kid's upper arm. When one tried to throw a punch at him, he gave him a not-too-subtle shake. "Be still," he warned.

Breathing hard, JoJo pointed at the one with the shaved head. "He knocked Eric in the head with a freakin' skateboard!"

"JoJo, calm down, and go see to Eric."

JoJo nodded, wiped his face and knelt down by his cousin.

Mark looked around at the crowd. "I need a few more parents, so please run inside and get me some help."

Kids disappeared and only a few seconds later, adults came pouring from the *Pizza World*. Mark turned custody of the boys over to a couple of men and went to his nephew's side. It was worse than he thought. Eric's head lay in a pool of blood. Mark ripped off his shirt and pressed the material against a large gaping wound on the right side of Eric's head. Someone shoved a jacket up under the child's head. Someone else covered him. Eric's eyes fluttered open briefly.

"Hey, kiddo, you're gonna be all right," Mark said.

"Never saw it coming," he whispered.

"It's okay, buddy."

Eric's eyes closed. Mark watched his breathing, took his pulse, bile rising at the thought of the worst-case scenario. He quickly banished that thought from his mind, briefly closed his eyes and prayed for healing. It was only another minute before the emergency crew arrived. Mark backed away and turned his nephew's care over to the paramedics.

He pulled out his phone. "Ricky," he said breathlessly. "Eric's hurt...some kid hit him in the head with a skateboard...No, Rick, he's not conscious...it's not good...they said they're gonna transport him to *Long Beach Children's Hospital*...yes, yes, I'll see you there."

Mark ran a hand through his hair and joined his son who was being questioned by the cops. So many kids had come forward to tell the story that the cops quickly had the gist of the situation.

Mark turned JoJo's face up to inspect. A trickle of blood ran from his nose and there were some scratches on his cheek by his eye and a knot on his forehead. "You okay?"

"Yes, sir. I tried to help, Dad," JoJo said as he turned back to the police who'd been taking his statement. "I mean, that guy hit Eric and he was like, completely out, but they were gonna kick him, keep pounding on him. They could've killed him. I pushed the big one over and got his attention. Then they both came at me, which was what I wanted. Anything to keep them away from Eric."

"What started it?" the cop asked. "Why did the kid hit your friend with his skateboard?"

"He didn't do anything, if that's what you're trying to say," JoJo stated defiantly. "And he's my cousin. The two started it for the usual reason. Just because Eric is Ricky Kino's kid."

"He's—aww man."

The cops turned to Mark who nodded his head. “Yes, I’m Ricky Kino’s brother, well, his step-brother, Mark Adams. Eric is my nephew and this is my son, Joseph.”

A murmur went through the crowd as the news spread.

Mark took a second to spot Logan. He found him kneeling by Eric’s side as the paramedics worked on him.

“We came outside in the parking lot because it was so loud inside and we wanted to talk to some girls we’d just met,” JoJo explained. He motioned to the two boys who were cuffed and sitting on the curb being interviewed by more cops. “Those two guys over there stopped us and asked to borrow some money and Eric turned them down cuz we didn’t have any money on us except for the few dollars to play some games. They started taunting him, pushing him. He told them to stop, but they kept on. It was embarrassing, you know? I mean, we were with girls.”

Mark closed his eyes briefly as he knew what JoJo was about to say.

“Eric warned them that he was a black belt and that if they kept it up he was gonna have to make them stop. Then they recognized him. They told him his dad was a fake and that he was gonna have to prove he could really do all that martial arts stuff. So, the next time the guy shoved Eric, he turned and kicked him in the head and laid the guy out. The other guy started throwing punches and stuff, but Eric just blocked them. I bent down to check on the guy who was down and told Eric he was okay. Eric turned to look at me for just a second. That’s when the other guy grabbed a skateboard and whacked Eric in the head. I told the girl I was with to go find you, Dad, and I tried to hold the two guys off until you got out here.”

Mark laid a gentle hand on JoJo’s shoulder. “You did good, son.” He looked at the cop. “I need to get to the hospital so I can be with Eric until his parents get there.”

The officer nodded. “We’ll follow up with you later.”

Mark handed him one of his cards. “Thank you.” He turned in time to see them loading Eric in an ambulance. “Come on, Logan,” he called.

Face pale, Logan joined Mark and JoJo. They rushed to the car.

They didn’t speak in the car because Mark used the time to contact the family. They arrived at the hospital fifteen minutes later. Mark left

JoJo and Logan in the waiting room and went back to see about Eric. Several minutes later, Eric's parents arrived with Eric's little sister, Taylor. Their faces grave, JoJo spotted them and waved at them as they rushed through the doors.

"Uncle Rick," JoJo called.

As a unit, Ricky, Bree, and Taylor turned toward JoJo.

Ricky knelt down. "JoJo, have you heard anything?"

"No, sir. Dad is back there with Eric." He peered up into his aunt's stricken face. "I'm sorry Aunt Bree. I didn't..." He choked on a sob. A tear ran down his face.

Ricky placed his hand on JoJo's cheek. "You can't blame yourself. Eric is responsible for his own actions." He squeezed his nephew's arm. "We'll talk later. I gotta go back to see about Eric now. Taylor, you stay here with JoJo."

Taylor nodded as tears ran down her face. Bree bent down and kissed her, and then turned to kiss JoJo's cheek. "Everything's gonna be okay," she said. "You just wait and see."

Ricky and Bree disappeared through the double doors. A few minutes later Mark emerged.

Over the next hour Logan watched an amazing happening; the Kino family in action. Next to arrive were the grandparents, Grandmaster Eric Kino and his wife Shelley, who Logan knew had been a MART grand champion. They stepped in and quickly arranged for added security, and a private waiting room.

It wasn't long before Ricky and Bree entered the new waiting area. The news wasn't great, but it could've been worse. The doctors found Eric had a minimally depressed skull fracture. He was taken into surgery to ensure no internal brain damage had occurred.

June Flower Kino arrived, the daughter of Eric and Shelley. She was a doctor, among other things and the family was listening to her intently as she gave her take on little Eric's condition. When she declared to the family that young Eric was gonna be just fine, they all breathed a sigh of relief. Logan was invited as they stood in a circle, held hands and prayed. It was Grandmaster Kino doing the praying. It was weird, Logan thought. There seemed to be like power coming off of him.

After the prayer, JoJo slumped in a chair, his eyes cast downward. Logan, thinking he could do some good, went to him and sat down in

the chair next to him.

"You okay?"

JoJo looked up and nodded. "I keep feeling like it's my fault."

"Why?"

"I should've seen the guy behind him. Or I should've done more to keep the fight from happening, you know what I mean?"

Logan shook his head. "No. I mean, it seems to me you're blaming yourself instead of the guy who swung that skateboard. I mean, I barely know Eric but I want to go find that guy and tear him apart."

JoJo sighed. "Yeah, me too, but Granddad says the need for revenge will destroy you."

"Yeah, but I'd rather beat up on that kid than like, listen to you blaming yourself and stuff."

JoJo smiled. "Yeah. Good point."

They sat quietly, watching more people file into the room.

"Are all these people part of your family?" Logan finally asked.

JoJo allowed a smile and sat up straight. "Yeah. It's sort of confusing, isn't it?" He pointed at his grandparents. "You know Grandmaster Kino, right? He's Ricky's dad. He's married to my grandmother, who is more like a mother to me cuz she raised me."

Logan's eyes followed where JoJo pointed. Even though the woman was JoJo's grandmother, Logan had a hard time believing it. She looked practically the same age as his mom.

"When Granddad met her she already had Aunt Bree and my dad and Uncle Joey and Granddad already had Uncle Ricky. Uncle Ricky's mom died when he was eleven."

"My age," Logan said softly.

"Yeah. Must've been sad for him. I can't really say, cuz my mom died when I was a baby, but I know how I'd feel if like, something happened to Grandma. Anyway, then Granddad and Grandma got married and they had June Flower. That's her over there with the long, dark, curly hair.

"Yeah, she's really pretty. Couldn't miss her."

JoJo shrugged. "Yeah, she's a brainiac. Her nickname is Jeffy, so I call her Aunt Jeffy. Anyway, so, then there is Uncle Ricky and Aunt Bree. They were stepbrother and stepsister sort of, because Granddad, who is Uncle Ricky's dad, met Grandma, who is Aunt Bree's mom, and they got married. But like, Uncle Ricky and Aunt Bree didn't

really meet until they were both grown ups, and they never lived together like brother and sister, so it's cool, and they are totally unrelated with different parents and stuff, and like, they were madly in love and so, they got married. They had Eric and Taylor, that's Eric's little sister. You already met her." He pointed toward the little girl who looked like a younger version of June Flower.

"So who are those people?"

"Oh, uh, those two Korean guys are Justin and Jason Lee. I call them Uncle Justin and Uncle Jason, because they're like family. They've been Granddad's best friends since before Uncle Ricky was born. And that blond lady is Jason's wife, Aunt Angel, and that girl there that looks a lot like Aunt Jeffy is Kimmie, she's Uncle Jason's and Aunt Angel's daughter. And that lady there is Aunt Lori, who is Uncle Justin's wife, and they don't have any kids."

"So, where's your Uncle Joey?"

"I don't know. He works for Uncle Jason, so he may be out on an assignment. If he is then Uncle Jason is probably the only one who can reach him."

"On assignment?"

"Yeah, he's an agent for Ameritech Security."

"Like an FBI agent?"

"Yeah, sort of."

They fell silent a moment.

JoJo scrubbed his hands over his face. "This is making me crazy. I mean, what if something is bad wrong with Eric?"

"I heard your grandma say no one is to say anything negative."

"Yeah, I know, but," he shook his head. "Logan, ya see, Eric and me, we're really close, I mean, like brothers. I should've seen that guy. Why didn't I see him?"

"I don't know. Why wasn't I out there with you? If I had been, maybe I would've seen him."

JoJo's chin quivered. "If he's not okay, I don't know what I'll do."

Logan patted JoJo's back. "He'll be okay, your aunt said so."

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Breez excused herself from the lecherous Congressman to see if she could find her supposed escort, not that he was much better, although he was younger and much better looking. She turned her head just in time to see him approaching.

"There you are. I just want to say thanks for leaving me alone with Congressman Richards," she said sarcastically. "He couldn't– hey! What are you doing?"

Joey's fingers closed tightly about her wrist.

"Will you please stop pulling on me," she whispered.

"Just come with me," he whispered back. "I want you to stand over here in this doorway," he continued, leading her down a corridor. "When you see me come by with Gordon, you head back to get Bella."

"But where..."

He shoved her into a doorway, up against a closed door. "No time, be right back."

He could hear the conversation as he approached.

"Gordon, please," Bella said. "Not here."

"Maybe you should've thought how it looked with you dripping all over that guy. Do you have any idea what that makes me look like?"

"I wasn't– ow, Gordon, don't do this, let go, you're messing up my hair, ow, please..."

"Gordon!" Joey said loudly. "There you are. Oh, uh, sorry to interrupt you two lovebirds," he said, slurring his speech. He wrapped an arm around Gordon's shoulder. "Just can't keep away from each other, huh? I feel the same way about Breez. Bella, tell me you won't mind if I borrow your sweetie for a minute. He's the only one that can settle the little dispute I'm having." He didn't wait for Bella's permission. A little pressure and Gordon had no choice but to go with him.

Joey glanced at Bella as he walked her husband away, giving her a sloppy grin. He leaned close to Gordon as they turned the corner and walked down the corridor where he'd left Breez. "Hope you don't mind helping me out, man. I mean, heck, we're practically related now, huh?"

Breez rolled her eyes at Joey's words as she waited for him to pass with Gordon in tow. Once they turned the next corner she dashed back to Bella, who stood in the hall, leaning against the wall. Her hair was falling off to one side, her face pale, her hands shaking.

"Bella?" Breez said gently as she approached. "Joey said you were back here. Are you okay?"

Bella stood tall and gave a shaky smile. "Yes, of course I'm okay. Why would you ask that?"

Breez pressed her lips together to keep from screaming at her sister. "Because I know Gordon, and I know how mean he can be. Were you two having a fight?"

"Not really."

"Did he hurt you?"

Bella sniffed. "Breez, please, I don't want to argue with you now."

Breez grabbed her sister and hugged her. "Okay, I'm sorry, Bella. It's okay. Here, let me help fix your hair."

Bella stood still and allowed her little sister tend to her. Once her hair was again presentable, Breez looked her over and smiled. "There, good as new."

"Thank you."

Breez looked deeply into her sister's eyes. "Just one thing, Bella. I have to say just one thing. You don't have to stay. Please, sweetie, get out before it's more than just a messed up hairdo. Okay, I'm done. Just think about it." She linked her arm with her sister's and escorted her back up the corridor.

In the meantime, Joey stopped just outside the large dining hall. "Where'd they go? Well, hell, Gordon, I guess they all left. Probably because they knew I was about to prove them all wrong. I told them to hold on. I was gonna go get Gordon Landow. He'd set them straight."

Gordon sighed impatiently. "And just what was I supposed to set them all straight about?"

"You know that movie I did, where the guy got away with murder due to a technicality? They said that would never really happen and I begged to differ. What do you say, Gordon?"

"It could happen," Gordon said indifferently, then smiled proudly. "If I were defending him, it would be highly likely."

"Aha!" Joey crowed. "I knew you'd agree with me." His cell phone vibrated again for the third time in a row. Exasperated, he pulled it from his pocket, noted the number. "Excuse me, Gordon, I have to take this." He walked away.

"Yeah," Joey said to Jason. A moment later he cursed softly. "He's in surgery now?... I'm on my way... but ...yeah, I guess you're right... Listen, tell everyone... got it. Keep me posted."

"Is there a problem?" Breez asked from behind him.

"My nephew was assaulted. Some punk cracked his skull with a skateboard. They have him in surgery now."

"You need to leave?"

Joey shook his head. "No. Jason said they're pretty certain he's gonna be fine. It's just the waiting game now. He told me to stay on the job, I can't do any good there. They'll keep me posted."

Breez nodded. "I'm sorry. Really."

"Thanks. Try to keep positive thoughts. Those were the instructions from my mother."

"Do you always listen to your mother?" Breez teased.

Joey didn't even smile, only blinked earnestly. "Always."

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Three grueling hours later, the doctor entered the waiting room. "Mr. and Ms. Kino?"

Ricky and Bree rose and stepped forward. "How is he?"

"He's gonna be fine."

Bree broke down and cried tears of relief as did most of the other females in the room. Ricky circled his arm around her for support while he blinked back his own tears.

"The fracture is clean," the doctor went on. "No debris or bone fragments. There is, however, a cerebral contusion and we'll need to keep him here for observation for a few days."

June Flower dried her tears and stepped forward to ask several pertinent questions. The doctor didn't know her, but knew of her. He answered her questions in detail.

Grinning, JoJo and Logan hugged each other before they thought better of it and separated.

Mark rested his hand on his son's shoulder and smiled down at Logan. "Well, it's almost midnight, guys. Logan, I guess I need to get you home."

Logan hung his head. "Yes, sir."

"I guess I'll see you next Saturday," JoJo said.

Logan cheered up. "Yeah, I'll be there."

"Let me tell the family goodbye and we'll get on the road," Mark said. "JoJo, you make your rounds."

JoJo rolled his eyes and went about saying his goodbyes to his family. Mark approached Ricky and Bree, his jaw clenched tightly.

"I, uh, don't know what to say," he began.

"What do you mean?" Bree said, smiling sweetly at her brother.

"I think you know," Mark said. "You trusted me to take care of

Eric and it comes down to this. I mean, he could've died."

"Mark, guilt is a negative, destructive emotion," Ricky said. "And I know you know that. Remorse is different. Guilt is unnecessary. If Bree and I had been at the *Pizza World* with Eric tonight and he wanted to walk outside with a girl, I feel certain we would've let him. It would've gone down the exact same way. The guilty party is the kid who hit him and Eric himself, for running his mouth. If absolution is what you want, little bro, you got it from me."

Mark nodded and forced the emotions back under the surface.

"Me too," Bree said, kissing his cheek.

"Thanks," Mark said, heaving a sigh. "I'll be on my knees tonight in gratitude."

"For sure," Ricky agreed.

"Well, I need to get Logan back to his house."

"Yeah, that's an interesting story I'd like to hear," Ricky said.

"Yes, yes it is. Later." He shook Ricky's hand, kissed his sister and niece, hugged his mother and stepfather, kissed his little sister June Flower and Jason's daughter Kimmie, waved to the rest of the crowd and took his leave.

✞✞✞

1 John 3:20

"For whenever our heart condemns us,
God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything."

Chapter Three

"Do you think your agents are finished at the house?" Breez asked quietly as she watched Bella and Gordon drive away from the Governor's mansion.

Joey took her by the elbow to guide her to her car. "They finished hours ago."

"Oh. Who's gonna be listening in on them?"

"Tonight, it will be me. Then we'll have shifts. The most danger is during the evening hours, like five to midnight, which I will take."

Breez turned to him. "I can't thank you enough. I feel so much better knowing you'll be looking out for her."

Joey grinned. "Should I take that to mean I've won your trust?"

Breez smiled. "Where Bella is concerned, yes."

They arrived at Breez's car. She turned to offer a smile before she opened her door but Joey was right there. Pressing his palms to the driver-side window, he trapped her against her car door. "And how about where you're concerned, Breez Sheridan," he murmured close to her ear. "Do you trust me to take care of you?"

She gave a short burst of laughter. "I trust you about as far as I can throw you."

"Then I intimidate you?" he said, leaning closer.

Breez held her chin up high. "No one intimidates me."

Joey chuckled. "Now that, I believe." Lifting his hand, he rubbed the back of his knuckles down her cheek. "Beautiful Breez Sheridan, if I asked you for a kiss goodnight would you give it to me?"

Breez's eyes glittered indignantly. "Absolutely not. I barely even know you."

Joey shrugged. "Well then, I won't ask."

His head dipped and he kissed her. Her hands came up to press on his chest as she struggled to push him away, but he gentled the kiss. Breez's eyes fell closed, her hands stopped trying to push him away and instead, grabbed the lapels of his jacket. Here was a man she found

difficult to resist. Strong, confident, self-assured and Lord, the man could kiss. His clever mouth moved over hers, coaxing a response from her. Her heart pounded and she found it hard to catch her breath. She felt him move even closer. He pulled back, smiled at her and then kissed her one more time before he lifted his head and stepped back.

It was the arrogant smile on his face that reminded her she hadn't given him permission to kiss her. Catching her breath and smoothing her hair, she frowned. "You are incorrigible," she hissed.

"So I've been told."

"I suppose you're gonna tell me that was part of your job too."

"Oh, no. That was purely for pleasure. I have to go."

He helped her into her car and had to jump back when Breez practically slammed the door on him. Smiling broadly, he knocked on the window. "Drive safe."

She rolled her eyes and peeled out.

Joey chuckled as he watched her drive away. His cell vibrated and he pulled it out and read the text message. *Eric out of danger. All is well.* Smiling, he said a prayer of thanks and headed to his car. He needed to high-tail it back to the Landows' home.

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Joey chugged down the contents of a Red Bull, adjusted his earbud and continued typing the report for Jason on his laptop. All was quiet on the home front. Joey sat in his car slightly down the road from the Landow home. The home on Mulholland had a long drive, but no security gate, and was easily seen from the street. Gordon would want to make sure his wealth was visible, Joey thought.

Joey arrived at his stakeout just in time to see his brother Mark pull up the drive. He listened to Mark tell the story of what had happened to young Eric. Bella was horrified and Gordon pretended to be concerned. The moment Mark left the home, Gordon ordered Logan to bed. The boy wisely did not argue. Joey then listened as Gordon berated Mark, the Kino family in general and Ricky and Bree because they were actors. That brought Gordon around to Joey.

Joey smiled as he listened to Gordon's opinion of his sister-in-law's new love and the horrible family she would be involving herself with, which of course was ridiculous. The Kino family was highly respected in most circles. Gordon let Bella know that if Breez ended up marrying that "cocky little punk," he'd have to put a complete halt to

Bella seeing her sister.

Joey held his breath, his eyes darting to the monitor on his dash, not sure if Bella would argue with Gordon on the subject. If she did, Joey may have to reveal himself early in the game, for he wouldn't allow Bella to be hurt on his watch. If it'd been Breez that Gordon was talking to, she would've totally laughed in his face. But Breez's sister was nothing like her. Bella was meek, broken and obviously abused, just as Breez had said.

Thankfully, when Gordon told Bella he'd restrict her from seeing her sister, she showed the same wisdom as her son, kept her mouth closed, professed her exhaustion and went to bed. Thirty minutes later, though, Gordon had joined her. Joey listened to the anguished sounds Bella let slip and he knew full well that what he heard wasn't love being made. It was, in essence, rape. Not that Bella had told her husband "no." She'd be too afraid to do that. Joey heard her wince a few more times and then, thankfully, it was over. Hopefully, all would be quiet the rest of the night. Joey would spend that time writing up his report.

As his mind went over the course of the evening, it came to rest on Breez. Hard to believe she was four years younger than Bella. That would make her twenty-seven. The woman was strong, beautiful, and loved her sister. In some ways the sisters could pass for twins. Their faces were similar, yet he would say Breez had sharper angles. They both had black hair. Bella's was longer and stick straight. Breez's hair fell in soft ringlets that just brushed her shoulders. Both had gorgeous blue eyes. He couldn't say they both had beautiful smiles, because he'd never seen Bella smile, but he could say Breez's mouth was as alluring as a mug of hot spiced rum on a cold, winter's night.

He thought of the first time he'd kissed her, under the stairs at the Governor's mansion. It'd been merely a diversion, but the jolt had taken him by surprise. She'd tasted good, and he hadn't wanted to stop. Several times over the evening, he'd found himself thinking about it, which wasn't like him at all when he was on the job. So, he'd indulged a second time when he'd walked her to the car. He pressed his lips tightly together at the memory.

She did something to him. Never had he felt such a charge, such an attraction to anyone. It was strong, this pull she had on him. He liked her strength, her feisty temperament and the soft spot she

reserved for her elder sister. Family loyalty was high on his list, and he had to admire her resolve to rescue Bella.

At Breez's car, he'd leaned forward, breathed in her scent and was lost. He realized he'd wanted her and judging from her reaction to his kiss, it would not have been very difficult to seduce her. But there were several reasons not to. She was a client and that would be the fastest way to lose his position at Ameritech. She was the sister of his assignment. And most importantly, that's not how a Christian man operates. He knew this woman would be like a drug. One time would never be enough. One taste had already not been enough, which is why he would try to quell this desire. He had a job to do.

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"Hey, kiddo," Mark said when young Eric opened his eyes.

Eric blinked. "Hey, Uncle Mark. Hey, JoJo."

"How ya feelin'?"

"A little dizzy." He closed his eyes again. "They said it would pass." His eyes searched the room. "Where's Mom and Dad?"

"Well, you were sleeping pretty good so I told them to go ahead and step out and grab a bite to eat."

Young Eric nodded his head slowly. "So, did my dad tell you he's pissed at me or anything like that?"

Mark smiled at him. "Well, not in so many words. I'm sure he's waiting for you to get better before he lowers the boom."

"It was my fault," Eric said. "I mean, I sort of wanted to show off, you know, big tough guy, watch me kick this guy's butt."

"You did show him, for a second, anyway," JoJo said.

"Don't encourage him," Mark said. "Look, we're all feeling a little guilty. I should've stuck a little closer to you guys. JoJo thinks he should've seen it coming. You shouldn't have run your mouth. Even your mom and dad think they should've done a better job of teaching you the consequences of your actions. We'll all learn, we'll make adjustments and we'll let it go."

Eric nodded. "Earlier this morning when the doctor came in, he said I might be able to go home by Wednesday."

"That would be great," JoJo said.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?"

Eric smiled broadly as his other uncle came through the door. "Hey, Uncle Joey."

"Hey, bud. What the heck have you gone and done, huh?"

"I'm sure you've heard the story."

"Yeah, I have," Joey said. He reached out, ruffled JoJo's hair in greeting, then offered his hand to his brother. "Mark, you doin' okay?"

"I guess, considering."

Joey smiled up at his big brother. "Feeling guilty?"

"You know me too well."

Grinning in agreement, Joey turned back to his nephew, leaned over the bed and ran his hand gently over the young man's forehead. "You gave us all a scare."

"Yes, sir, I'm sorry."

"Save the apologies for your mom. For me, you just get healthy."

"Got it. Thanks, Uncle Joey."

"Sorry I wasn't here for ya last night."

"It's okay."

"Jason said you were on assignment last night?" Mark asked.

"Yeah, actually, while I'm here I'd like to talk to you about it."

"Really? That's a new one. Usually, I can't pry the information out of you."

"Yeah, well, I have a feeling you're gonna be part of all this. It's about Bella Landow."

Mark came to attention. "She's okay?"

"For now, yeah. Step outside and we'll talk. Besides, these guys probably have lies they want to get straight."

"Funny, Uncle Joey," JoJo said.

Mark and Joey walked down to a small waiting area and took a seat.

"I understand you had Logan Landow with you last night?"

"Yeah, I did. The Landows had some big..."

"Dinner at the Governor's mansion. I know. I was there. I've been hired by Breez Sheridan, Bella's sister, to protect Bella from her husband. She believes she's being abused by the man."

"I believe the same thing," Mark said.

"Yeah, well, I can confirm it. All the signs are there. I broke up what would've been him roughing her up in a deserted hallway at the Gov's house last night. Apparently, Gordon was angry at her for paying too much attention to some guy who'd had a little too much to drink. I saw him grab her by the arm and jerk her off down a back hall."

Mark's jaw clenched. "Did he hurt her?"

"He would have. He didn't have time because I intervened. That tells me that if he's taking the chance of showing himself at an event like that, it means he's pretty much out of control."

Mark shook his head. "I've been turning over in my mind what I'm gonna do to get her out of her situation. In class yesterday, I noticed bruises all over her arm. She said it was from practicing with Logan."

"Well, she's obviously lying," Joey said. "She doesn't want anyone to know. And I'm not supposed to let her know that she's being protected, and protecting her is a little difficult since she's sleeping with the enemy. What I'm aiming for is gathering enough evidence against Gordon Landow to make him let her and Logan go, without a fight."

Mark nodded. "Then my part is to convince her she can leave him."

Joey eyed his older brother. "Yeah, that's what I was gonna ask you to do. Breez apparently hasn't been able to get through and make her see the light, but that's because Bella sees herself as completely trapped. Maybe coming from you she'll put a little more stock in what you have to say about it. I'm hoping you'll be able to talk some sense into her." Joey was silent a moment, then his eyes narrowed. "You like her."

Mark grimaced, but he didn't try to hide his feelings from Joey. They were close. Almost like twins in that they finished each other's sentences, communicating almost telepathically. They were the epitome of brotherly love and loyalty. It would be ridiculous to try to hide the feelings he had for Bella from his brother. "It's more than just liking her, Joe. If she weren't married, I'd so be pursuing her."

Joey nodded. "She's a sweet lady. And a looker. Her sister, on the other hand, is a handful."

Mark's eyebrows rose. "Really, now? And so, do I detect a note of interest there?"

"A freakin' symphony, man. It's crazy. I just met her Friday, but I have to say, the chemistry is powerful, and not only that, I'm even feeling a little, I dunno, I guess you could say, territorial." He shrugged. "Anyway, it doesn't matter what I'm feeling. She's a client. But..."

"But she won't be forever," Mark finished.

"Exactly."

"Well, at least yours is available."

"Be patient, bro."

"I have no choice."

"What is it Ricky always said?" Joey reminded him.

"There's always a choice," they said in unison.

"Well, let me get back in there and give Eric a hard time. I have about four hours to sleep and then get back to work."

"Soo, someone's watching over Bella for now?"

"Jeff Davis," Joey said with a nod.

"Are there orders to intervene?" Mark asked.

"You think we would stand by and let it happen?"

Mark shrugged. "What if it blows your cover?"

"Then it's blown. Bella's safety is first and foremost." Joey eyed Mark's furrowed brow. "We'll take care of her. I promise."

Mark nodded with a sigh. "I just feel so useless, you know what I mean? I want to do something to help her. Actually what I want is to kick Gordon's butt. Or maybe something a little more drastic than that."

"Yeah, I get ya."

"The thought of him putting his hands on her." Mark stopped and shook his head. "It just sickens me."

Joey eyed Mark. "She's married to the man, bro. You've gotta step back a little."

"I know, I know, but those bruises on her arms, they're defensive wounds, Joe. The scenario of what must've happened to put those bruises there, I mean, she'd have to be raising her arm to block a punch, I mean, geez, it's just sickening."

Joey didn't dare tell him what took place last night in the happy couple's bed. "Look, the best you can do right now is convince her it's possible to leave him. Make sure she understands there is a way out."

"I will. I'll make her listen to me. In the meantime, you go rest so you can get back to work. I'll feel a lot better when I know you're on the job. No offense to Jeff."

Joey grinned. "I'll take that as a compliment."

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Breez lunged for the ball, swung hard and lost the grip on her racket. Both tennis ball and racket hit the net. Her partner jogged toward her.

"Okay, what's up, Breez?"

"What do you mean? You beat me. It happens." She smiled. "Not often, but it happens."

"Not like this. I've barely broken a sweat. What's up?"

They walked toward a couple of chairs. Breez grabbed up her towel and patted her face, while her friend Sara gulped down some water.

"I don't know, Sara. Maybe I'm just worried about Bella."

Sara sighed and eased down into the chair. "Did you look into Ameritech Security? I'm telling you, they are the best. They did some work for my father when he had the big opening for his mall and he says they're top-notch, state-of-the-art, blah, blah, blah. He couldn't stop talking about them."

"Yes, I looked and I hired them."

"Really?"

"They're expensive but they feel they can help me."

"How does Bella feel about that?"

"Bella doesn't know. They've set up a surveillance operation to gather enough evidence so that Gordon won't be able to stop the divorce or keep Bella's son from her."

"And while they're gathering this evidence, I mean, hello—what's happening to Bella?"

Breez sighed. "Well, Joey will be by her side, stepping in if necessary to make sure she's okay."

"Joey? Who's Joey?"

"Agent Adams. He's the Ameritech agent assigned to the case."

"Joey Adams? As in the actor karate guy who fights in the Kino Challenges?"

"One and the same."

"Wow. Does he look as good in person as he does on the screen?"

Breez shrugged. "He's kinda cute."

Sara eyed her friend. "Kinda cute, huh?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't try to hide it from me, Breez. You're interested in him, aren't you? No, don't deny it," she added when Breez raised her chin. "Okay, give me the scoop."

Breez broke into a sly smile. "He's gorgeous. He's hot. He's so freaking tough. He's smart. He is the ultra alpha male. And he..." She

stopped, not sure she wanted to share the rest.

"And he what?" Sara asked, her voice rising.

Breez shrugged. "Nothing."

"Oh, no, girlfriend. You can't just stop talking like that. You tell me now or I'll never speak to you again."

Breez grinned at her. "It'll cost you lunch."

"On me, now finish."

"I've never had a man kiss me where I didn't want it to end, where I could feel it down to my toes, and where I can't stop thinking about it."

"Back up, back up. He kissed you? When?"

"Last night," Breez said as she went on to tell all about her evening.

"So that's why you couldn't play worth crap today. Wow, I've got to get a look at this guy."

"I was thinking I'd download one of his movies," Breez said, "just to, you know, do a little research."

"Oh, yeah, girl, I know."

"The main thing is, he's totally into his job. I feel good knowing he's looking after Bella. I'm so glad you told me about Ameritech."

"Me too. So, tell me, do you think this might turn out to be a real relationship for you?"

Breez shrugged. "I don't know. Probably not."

"Why not?"

"He's cocky and usually for me that would be a real turnoff, but then again, on him, it just sort of fits, you know? I mean, I'm sure he can back up anything he says. And he's hot and I can't get that kiss out of my mind, but here's the real kicker– I like him. He's funny, he's intelligent and I get the idea he'd treat a woman with so much care."

"Oh, wow, listen to you, Breez. You've got it bad."

"Yeah, I guess I do. And that's a recipe for pain, isn't it? I'll have to try to keep my feelings out of it."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you have to turn him down in other ways, now does it?"

Breez smiled. "No, I certainly don't have to turn him down."

"Oh, this is so delicious. You'd better keep me posted."

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For Mark, Monday morning court had been a challenge, to say the least. And then afterward, instead of getting some work done, he'd had to grab lunch with his boss and the county prosecutor. He supposed, he should be grateful to Justin for the hookup.

Finally back at the office, he'd been hard at work all afternoon. He'd been hoping to take the afternoon off and go watch JoJo's football practice, but that obviously wasn't gonna happen. He'd try again tomorrow. JoJo's first game was this coming Thursday.

It was almost five and he was finishing up some paperwork when his cell phone rang. He answered on the third ring. "Mark Adams," he said, distracted by the file in front of him.

"Master Mark? This is Logan."

Mark sat up straight and gave his full attention to the young man on the phone. "Logan, hey! Is everything okay?" he asked, his heart skipping a beat.

"Uh, yes, sir. It's just, well, you said I could call, I mean, about the test and all, but I can talk to you later, if like, you're busy or something."

"Not at all, Logan. I needed a break. So, did you have a specific question or are you just feeling a bit nervous?"

"Well, maybe a little nervous."

"You'll do fine, son. Just think of it as class. When you test, if you do everything the way you do in class, you'll pass with no problems."

"Will you be there?"

"I will, and so will Master Kane, and I think Grandmaster Kino intends to drop by. I'm just telling you that now so it doesn't freak you out on Saturday."

"Thanks. He's like your father, right?"

"Well, my father lives in San Francisco. Grandmaster Kino is my stepfather, but I've spent at least half my life since I was eight years old with him. He's a great man and we're very close."

"Are you close to your real dad?"

"Sure. We have a lot of mutual respect and love in our family. I think that's because my mother is so full of love."

"Yeah, my mom is too."

"I can tell your mom loves you very much."

"Yeah. She's cool. I just wish..."

When he didn't go on, Mark tried to urge him. "Go ahead, Logan,

you can say anything you want to me. I promise, whatever you tell me won't go any further."

Mark waited in silence while the young man pulled his thoughts together. His heart went out to him when he heard a slight sniffle.

"Well, I mean, my dad, I just wish he was more like you. What I mean is, well, you're so nice and all. You'd never— well, forget it."

"Logan, I can't forget it. I think I know what you're trying to tell me. I know it hurts to say it, but it will help to have it off your chest. Listen, you're not alone. I think I know what's going on and I intend to do something about it."

"No, you can't. It will only make things worse for her."

"I want you to trust me. I'm not gonna let anything else happen to your mom. I'm gonna help her. Things can't go on like they are. Your father has hit your mom, hasn't he?"

Silence.

"Logan?"

"Yes, sir."

"How often does it happen?"

"All the time. It used to be just every once in a while, but now, it's gotten a lot worse."

"Worse like once a month?"

"Oh, more than that. Maybe like every week, or really it's like every day he yells at her or hits her and stuff."

Mark swallowed hard to suppress the fury. "I understand. And does he ever hit you, Logan?"

"No, sir. I wish he would. I wish he'd hit me instead of her."

"I understand you feeling that way, Logan, but that wouldn't help your mom. You see, she loves you, and that would hurt her even more. Listen, I want you to know that I'm working on a solution. I'm gonna get your mom out of this situation."

"How? He won't let her go. I heard him tell her if she ever tried to leave him he'd make sure she'd never see me again."

"That won't happen."

"You don't know. He can do anything. He's got lots of friends. Judges and stuff. He says they'll never believe her."

"Well, your father has met his match," Mark said firmly. "Chin up, kiddo. It's all gonna work out."

"Promise? Can you really promise that?"

Mark drew a deep breath. "Yes, son, I promise."

Logan remained silent while he regained his composure. Finally, he found his voice. "Thank you, Master Mark."

"Thank you, Logan, for trusting me. Where's your mom right now?"

"She's downstairs cooking dinner. He gets real mad if dinner isn't on the table when he gets home or if something's not right."

Trying to gather a little more evidence, Mark pressed him. "What do you mean, 'not right'?"

"Like the other day, uh, I think it was Thursday. There were spots on his glass. First he just yelled at her about being lazy and stuff and when she didn't move fast enough to get him another glass, he threw the glass at her. She ran into the kitchen and he went after her. She was scared, Master Mark. I begged him to leave her alone. He slapped her and I jumped on his back, but he pulled me off and told me to go to my room. I wasn't gonna go but my mom, she was crying and begging me to do what he said. So I finally did." He stopped and wiped his nose before he went on. "I could hear him hitting her. I could hear her crying, but I just stayed in my room."

"You did the right thing, Logan. I know it seems like you should do something, but your mom doesn't want to have to worry about you too."

"I hate him. I wish he was dead."

"Who are you talking to?" Bella asked, her voice shrill.

"No one, Mom."

The phone went dead. Mark blew out a breath, dialed Joey.

"Yeah," Joey said when he answered. "I got it all on record."

"What's happening now?"

"He won't tell her who he was talking to. She's crying and telling him he must never tell anyone about his dad." Joey was silent a moment while he listened and watched.

"He's telling her he's sorry. She's hugging him, asking him if he's done his homework, telling him to get ready for dinner, his father will be home soon."

Mark sighed. "Okay. Thanks, Joe."

"Yeah. Hey, bro, we'll get him. She's gonna be okay."

"Yeah."

"So, Logan, he's a good kid," Joey added.

"Logan is an amazing kid."

"We'll do right by him," Joey assured Mark before he hung up.

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Wednesday morning Breez opened the door and found her heart fluttering. Agent Joseph Adams stood on her front porch, a cocky smile on his angel face. His brown eyes twinkled as if he knew what she was thinking. Drawing a deep breath, she frowned up at him.

"Good morning, gorgeous," he said, reaching out to tug on a shiny, black curl.

She looked him over. He was dressed in jeans and a USC t-shirt. His light brown hair was tousled as if he'd merely run his hand through it when he'd dressed. She looked down her nose and drew a haughty breath. "What are you doing here?"

"Aren't you gonna invite me in?" he asked.

Realizing she was showing extremely bad manners, she opened the door wider and stepped aside. "Of course. Sorry, please come in."

As he passed her, she could smell soap and the light spicy scent of his aftershave and she had a strong urge to lean close and sniff, which she resisted.

"Jason asked me to give you a report on what we have so far. I suppose I should've called and scheduled an appointment, but my nephew came home from the hospital this morning and I was on my way to their house to see him. You were on the way, so I thought I'd take a chance. Do you have some time this morning, or should I make that appointment?"

"No, I have time," she said, tugging on the collar of the blouse she wore. "I was just having breakfast. I'd offer you some cold cereal, but you don't strike me as the type."

His smile flashed. "Are we alone?"

"Wh– why do you ask?"

He shrugged. "I was gonna offer to cook a real breakfast for you and I was wondering if you had a maid, housekeeper, butler, you know, someone who takes care of you and this giant palace whose domain I would be intruding upon. I mean, in a place like this," he said, his arm swinging wide at the luxurious home, "I figure there's someone."

Her eyes swept the foyer, trying to see what he saw. "No," she sighed. "I live alone."

"You take care of this palace by yourself?"

"I have someone come in once a week. This was my parents' home, but it's hardly a palace."

"Maybe not, but it is very, very nice," he said appreciatively. He circled the foyer and came back to stand in front of her. "So, no cook?"

"No."

He moved close. "Then let me cook for you."

She stepped back. "That's really not necessary."

He shrugged. "Okay, then *you* cook for *me*."

She rolled her eyes at him. "I don't cook."

Amused, he took her hand. "Well then, *I'll* cook for me. Show me the kitchen."

Sighing, she pulled her hand from his grasp and led the way.

Joey watched her as she walked. She wore some tight jeans, an unbuttoned blue-and-white-striped tailored shirt over a white tank top. Her feet were bare, her hair was down and she wore no makeup. He could eat her alive.

The kitchen was as big and elaborate as the house. Brown and gold granite countertops shone in the early morning sun. A stainless steel cooktop graced the large center island. The morning news was being broadcast on a TV built into one of the cabinets. Breez picked up a remote and turned it off. Joey reached up and grabbed a small skillet from above his head.

"Um, eggs are..." she began, but he cut her off.

"In the fridge I bet," Joey said with a grin. "Sit down, Breez, I'll take it from here."

"Fine," she said as she eased down at a small table, set in a bay window that looked out over the backyard. She spooned up some cereal that had gone soggy, looked it over and put the spoon down.

Joey rummaged through the refrigerator, coming out with eggs, butter, onion, tomato, cheese and milk. Eyeing a loaf of bread, he grabbed it and added it to his mix.

"So is Bella okay?" Breez asked as she watched Joey work.

"For now."

"Has he hurt her since you've been listening in?"

"He's threatened her. He's belittled her. He's ordered her around and called her names. He hasn't hit her since I've been on the job, but he did last Thursday."

She came to the counter. "Last Thursday? That was the day *before*

I came into Ameritech and hired you. How do you know about last Thursday, and what happened?"

As Joey chopped vegetables and beat eggs, he told her of the conversation he'd heard between Mark and Logan.

Breez shook her head, her eyes moist and then called Gordon a few choice names. "We have to get her out of there."

"We will. Bella and Logan are going to a belt party at my mother's house Saturday and..."

"Belt party?"

"Yeah, you know, martial arts, black belt. So, there's a promotion test for Bella's and Logan's class. JoJo, Mark's son, wanted to have a party on the beach and Bella and Logan will be there and Mark intends to get Bella alone and let her know her options in no uncertain terms."

"Your brother is a saint."

Joey gave a short burst of laughter. "Yeah, I'll tell him you said so. No, really, he cares about Bella and Logan. He's had them in his Saturday class for almost two years."

"You went to him with what you know?"

"Look, I don't make it a habit to discuss assignments with my brother, but he already suspected. When I spoke to him he'd been about to confront Bella about it anyway. He was gonna tell her he could help her. I trust him and he was relieved to know I was watching over her."

"I know how he feels," Breez mumbled. She rose, retrieved two plates and set them on the counter. "So now what?"

"He's still gonna confront her, on Saturday. He's gonna let her know that he knows what's going on, help her understand that there is a way out, that she doesn't have to stay in that situation. Hopefully, she'll be willing to listen. She knows him and he thinks that she trusts him."

"I hope you're right," Breez said softly as she watched Joey slide half of an omelet onto each plate.

He buttered toast and placed it next to the eggs. "One way or the other, Breez, this business with Gordon is done." He smiled. "Would you mind grabbing some juice and a couple of forks?"

"Hm? Oh, yes, of course."

Joey carried plates to the table while Breez poured juice. He murmured a soft blessing on the food, then watched her as she walked to the table, licking OJ off her finger. For a moment he couldn't

breathe.

Breez sat and scooped up some eggs. Her eyes opened wide. "This is delicious!"

"Thanks. I like cooking. Actually thought about becoming a chef at one point."

She smiled at him. "Really? Now that's interesting. A chef, a martial artist, an actor, a security agent. You're a man of many talents."

"You don't know the half of it," he said slyly.

"And cocky," she added.

"Confident," he corrected.

He watched her as she ate. Beautiful Breez Sheridan came across as being a hard nut, but Joey could sense something much different. She lived alone in a giant house. She ate Special K at the table by the window while the TV kept her company. Lonely. She seemed lonely and actually quite vulnerable. Of course, she would never admit to that. He smiled at her.

"So we know about me, tell me about you, Breez."

She shrugged. "What do you want to know?"

"You live in this big house all alone, you attend dinners at the Governor's mansion, you have money to burn and you worry about your sister. What else?"

"There's really not anything else."

His eyes looked her over. He cleared his throat. "I doubt that. What do you do? Do you work? Do you have any hobbies or interests? Who are your friends?"

"Friends? There are some girls at the country club that I play tennis with, and go to lunch with sometimes. No one special though. Bella used to be my best friend before she married."

"I can understand that because Mark and I are like that. So, you say you play tennis?"

"Yeah. I took lessons for years and got pretty good for a while, then burned out. Why? Do you play?"

"Sure. You'll have to come out and kick my butt some time."

"Happy to," she said with a gleam in her eye.

"So, how old were you when your parents died?"

"I was twenty. They were coming home from a stupid fundraiser and a drunk driver came out of nowhere. It completely devastated me. I couldn't believe it. Sometimes still can't. I've actually come in the

house and started to call out, 'Mom, I'm home,' before I realize what I'm doing. I've thought many times about selling this giant house and just taking off, but then, I can't bring myself to do it. It's like, I feel lost."

Thinking how hard it would be to lose his own parents, Joey reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "It had to be tough."

Breez looked down at the strong hand holding hers. "It *was* tough. Bella was already married and Logan was only a little guy then. Three or four, I think. At the time, I thought Bella was lucky, you know? Like, at least she had a husband and child to take care of to keep her occupied. Now I realize when she learned of our parents' death, it was probably like being thrown overboard to the sharks for her, because if my father was still around, no way would Bella be in this situation."

Joey stood and began clearing dishes. "Yeah, I think you're right. She lost her lifeline. I bet things got worse for her after your parents died. What I mean is, I bet Gordon got worse. He didn't have your father to answer to anymore; he could do what he wanted to Bella."

Breez stood, rinsed dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher. They worked quietly, side by side for several minutes.

"So you don't work?" Joey asked when the chore was complete.

She turned, leaned against the counter. "Actually, I paint. That's my, uh, thing, I guess. My dream."

Joey grinned. "You paint? Cool! I've been thinking about doing the walls in my loft a nice spiced pumpkin. Maybe you can come by and give me your opinion."

"Not that kind of painting," she growled.

He chuckled. "Really? Oh, you mean, like a portrait?" He came to stand right in front of her.

"No, you idiot, I mean like landscape type art."

He moved closer, smiling at the flash of anger in her blue eyes. "Landscapes? Really?"

"Yes, really."

He placed his right hand on the counter next to her and grabbed a curl with his left. "I'd like to see your landscapes."

"Very funny." She went to move away but he placed his left hand down on the counter, imprisoning her. He knew he was over the limit, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

"Move out of my way."

"You don't really want me to, do you, Breez?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

He chuckled. "You forget who you're talking to. Besides, Miss Sheridan, you don't fool me. I know exactly how you responded when I kissed you Saturday night."

Her cheeks flamed. "How very uncouth for you to mention that."

His hands came up to cup her face. "I only mention it because you affect me the same way. Breez, I don't know what I'm gonna do about you. You make me crazy. You make me forget myself. I keep telling myself hands off, but I can't seem to resist you." His head dipped and he touched his lips gently to hers.

When she winced he pulled away. He looked into her eyes which were darkening with passion and he realized her wince was from trying to fight it too. "Tell me no, Breez. Push me away. Please."

Her hands came up to lay flat against his chest. He waited for her to push. He would step back. He promised himself he would.

Breez intended to push him away, but when her hands met the hard muscles of his chest she was too tempted to explore. She moved her hands over him, feeling the dip between his pectorals.

He grunted and she looked up into his eyes. The moment she did he bent and kissed her mouth. Her eyes closed and she gave in and let him take her to heaven.

He moved closer. His hand moved through her hair, cradling her head. He cursed softly, mostly at himself, for not being able to resist the pull of this amazing woman.

He drew away and gazed at her, his breath labored. What was he doing? She was a client. Had he completely lost his mind?

Breez gazed up at him, her heart hammering. She knew he battled for control, but she didn't want him to gain it. "Don't stop," she whispered.

✝✝✝

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you

before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit."

Chapter Four

Joey's eyes flew up to Breez's as if making sure he'd heard her correctly. "Damn," Joey swore. "Where's your bedroom?"

"Through the dining room, upstairs, to the left."

He lifted her.

She wrapped her legs around his waist. "Now," she said.

He got as far as the dining room. Stopping abruptly, he eased her onto the table and took a step back, then two more.

"What are you doing?"

Chest heaving, he gazed down at the most incredibly beautiful sight he'd ever seen, Breez, eyes dark with passion, and also a little bit aggravated. He couldn't help it. He had to smile. He knew immediately it was gonna make her mad. "I'm sorry," he said quickly.

Breez couldn't believe what was happening. She'd been willing to give herself to this man, and now he was turning her down, after it was him who'd started it in the first place. Trying to recover some dignity, she sat up straight and smoothed her hair.

He advanced again, took her face in his hands, leaned forward and rested his forehead on hers, waiting for his breathing to return to normal. All the reasons why he shouldn't take her scrolled across his brain in bright neon. Forget the fact that she'd wanted him too, she was a client. Period. But there was something much more important, and that was his relationship with Jesus Christ. Didn't he just kneel down this morning in prayer, just a few hours ago and ask for protection for his family, healing for young Eric, and guidance for himself? What would he say this evening? He blew out a breath. Joey's firm desire to obey and please the Lord finally kicked in and gave him the strength to stop.

He'd never felt such an attraction, such an irresistible pull from any woman he'd ever known. If anyone had told him he'd put his own job in jeopardy out of lust for a good-looking woman, he would've told them they were crazy. Slowly, he pulled himself away and gazed down

at her. She smiled up at him, so he guessed she was no longer angry. His heart did a somersault.

"Well now," she said sweetly. "That was interesting."

His eyes blinked, a muscle hardened in his jaw, because he was realizing it was much more than interesting. Stepping back a few more steps, he held out a hand to pull her off the table. "Are you okay?"

She frowned. "Oh wow, you're not gonna do that macho, I shouldn't have taken advantage of you thing, are you?"

Giving a slight smile, he shook his head. "I guess I'm not, even though I am feeling pretty guilty right now." He stepped forward again and pulled her against his chest.

She nestled there a minute, enjoying his masculine scent, reveling in his strength and listening to the sound of his steady heartbeat. He lifted her face and placed a chaste kiss on her mouth. "Umm," she murmured. "You are amazing."

Now he frowned. "And you're not gonna do that, guess I'd better stroke the male ego kind of thing, are you?"

Amused, she shook her head. "No. Heaven knows you don't need it." Sighing, she pushed him away. "So, let's do this again sometime. Maybe next time we'll make it upstairs."

Joey didn't like the casual sound of her statement. There was nothing casual or mundane about what was happening between them. That she was attempting to make it seem that way pissed him off. He gently placed his hands on her shoulders. "We'll just see what happens," he answered. He gave a heavy sigh and leaned his forehead against hers. "I hate to say this, but I have to leave."

She lifted her face to offer him a kiss goodbye and just to keep her off kilter or possibly to make a statement, he cradled her face in his hands, tilted her head down and gently kissed her forehead. What statement he attempted to make, he wasn't sure. In his mind, a kiss on the forehead showed affection, care and concern for someone, which he thought might take away the feeling of "slam, bam, thank you ma'am." No matter what she wanted to think, this was not and would not become just a casual fling. Breez Sheridan and Joey Adams were gonna have a relationship. A real relationship. What they were not gonna do was have mind-numbing sex and then go on their merry separate ways.

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Mark watched her come into the studio, laughing with Logan, mussing his hair. He figured she was probably trying to lighten his mood and get rid of his nerves. She was selfless, this beautiful, sweet woman, and the thought of sniveling Gordon Landow striking her and causing her fear and pain made Mark want to kill the man.

Logan too, was a victim, Mark thought. Seeing the man who was supposed to take care of his mother and him do the things he'd seen, what must that do to a young boy? Mark sighed. His own father had been cruel to his mother at one point. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind he'd known that. He hadn't struck her, but he'd yelled at her and made her cry and Mark remembered the feeling of helplessness. He'd been six years old when his parents split, but still, he'd been old enough to be aware there was a problem.

Funny how he'd wiped those memories from his mind, forgiven his father, loved him. And that is because the man is my father, Mark thought, and that's simply what a son did, you loved your father. How torn Logan must feel, wanting to love his own father, and hating what the man did to his mother. Logan turned and smiled at him and Mark's heart filled with compassion for the boy.

Bella smacked Logan on the rear and pointed to the dressing room, then turned and approached, an exquisite and rare smile on her face.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi. So, is Logan still nervous?" Mark asked.

"So nervous. He couldn't even eat breakfast," she answered, her hands twisting together.

"And looks like 'Mom' is just as nervous," Mark said, nodding toward her balled fists.

"Huh?" She glanced down. Smiling, she rubbed her hands against her hips. "I guess I am. I think it's contagious."

"He'll do fine. He's actually really good."

"It means a lot to him."

"And so when are *you* gonna test and move up to green?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. There's a lot going on right now. It's sort of hard to concentrate."

He nodded, realizing that more than anything he wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her. "I understand," he said softly. He glanced past her to see Master Kane and Grandmaster Kino walk through the doors. He smiled at his stepfather as he approached.

"Hello, Mark," Eric Kino said, offering a slight bow.

Mark bowed. "Sir," Mark said, and then turned and offered the same to Master Kane.

"Master Adams," Master Kane said, then turned toward Bella with a bow.

Bella bowed.

"This is Bella Landow," Mark said to his stepfather. "She's a member of the class but it's her son, Logan, who's testing today."

"Logan who was at the hospital the other night, correct?" Eric asked.

"Yes, sir," Bella answered as she bowed. "Grandmaster Kino, it's an honor to meet you."

"And you," he said kindly, looking deeply into her eyes, having a strong sense of déjà vu and an immediate urge to comfort and protect.

"I hear Eric is doing better," Bella said. "I'm so relieved and glad he's gonna be okay."

"Thank you," Eric said kindly, unable to take his eyes from hers.

"Um, so where do we sit to watch?" Bella asked.

"Let me escort you," Master Kane said as he motioned toward some chairs lined up against the mirrors. Bella bowed again and left the group as Eric watched her leave. "Interesting woman," he said quietly to Mark.

Mark's eyes followed her. "Yes. Yes she is."

Eric's eyebrows rose. "I see."

Mark shook his head. "She's married."

"Not happily I'd venture to say."

"Why would you say that?" Mark asked.

"Her eyes are sad. They remind me of someone."

Mark searched the man's face. He'd grown up with this man and they were close, but they'd never talked about Mark's father's indiscretions with his mom. Which, he supposed was as it should be. Mark loved Eric and he was grateful to him. He'd come along and made his mother happy. He'd taken care of her, nurtured her, supported her in every endeavor and loved her to distraction. Really, what more could a son ask from a stepfather?

Sighing, Mark nodded. "I'm trying to help her. She's a victim of domestic violence."

"We are only victims if we allow ourselves to be," Eric said.

Mark nodded. He'd heard that phrase spoken by his stepfather many times over the years. "I think she believes that staying in that situation is her only choice. I'm gonna try to talk some sense into her today at the belt party, if I can find some time alone with her. She needs to know that she doesn't have to take the abuse her husband dishes out. She has options. If she realizes that, maybe she'll choose differently."

"Are you sure about this abuse?" Eric asked.

"Positive. I'd know just from her demeanor and the bruises, but Joey is assigned to the case and he confirms it."

"The case?"

"Jason has a case open on Bella. Her sister went to Ameritech for help. Bella's husband is a big, high-powered attorney and has threatened to take Logan from her if she tries to leave him. So she feels like she's trapped. I want to convince her she has a support system and she can get out. Especially now that Joey has been gathering evidence of his abuse."

"Has her husband hurt Logan?"

"Not yet. That doesn't mean it won't happen," Mark snapped.

Eric eyed the tall young man. "You're emotionally involved." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, sir, I am."

"You have feelings for her. Does she return them?"

"As I said, she's married."

"That wasn't my question."

Mark looked away, toward the woman they spoke of, then back at Eric. "It's hard to tell, but there is definitely a chemistry between us."

Eric nodded. "Her emotional state is gonna be precarious at best. She'll need a strong shoulder as she goes through the extraction and then the healing process."

"I can offer that."

Eric put his hand on Mark's shoulder and squeezed. "I know that. I'll help you any way I can."

Mark nodded. "I know that. Thanks."

"Well, let's get this thing going. There's a party waiting and your mom wants me back as soon as possible to help out."

"What's she all strung out about? I mean, there's only like ten kids coming over, right?"

"Your son invited one more here and one more there. It's turned into more like twenty kids and their parents."

Mark grinned. "Oh, well, I bet Mom is freakin'. Okay, let's get the show on the road."

Eric presided while Master Kane brought his class to order. This particular martial arts school was owned by the Kinos and run by Master Kane. Mark, himself a Master as a 5th-dan black belt, taught on Saturdays while Master Kane taught all weekday classes. It was a good arrangement. It helped out Master Kane so he could keep his weekends free, and it kept Mark up to speed while he worked on establishing a successful law practice. The students loved Mark, too. He was kind, laid back, and yet, they'd seen him fight enough to know he was extremely lethal, so he had their respect. Even though Mark was the stepson of Grandmaster Kino, he acted only as Master Kane's assistant as was his role in this particular school.

To be promoted within a Kino martial arts school was a big deal. The Kinos were legendary across the country. Everyone knew Grandmaster Eric Kino never let anyone advance without deserving it, which was not always the case in other martial arts schools. He demanded perfection from his schools and their students. Another reason for the legend was the fact that Grandmaster Kino's son was the famous movie martial artist, Ricky Kino, who married the famous actress Breanna Adams. Father and son had married mother and daughter.

Ricky Kino's martial arts talent had been put into question once by an emboldened paparazzo who challenged Ricky to fight five selected "real" martial artists in one night. Ricky accepted the challenge. It turned into a huge charity event with all proceeds going to what is now called the *Heal the World Foundation*, a charity his little sister, Jeffy, had established when just a kid.

The world went crazy for Ricky when he beat all five challengers, an unheard of feat. Since then the Kino Challenge has been fought yearly. In subsequent bouts though, Ricky lessened his role in the challenge and fought only three opponents. For five years, they'd brought in a second fighter from the Kino schools to fight the other two opponents. One year that second fighter role was fulfilled by seventh Dan, Joey Adams, step-brother to Ricky and little brother to Mark. The younger man's popularity made him an immediate hit. Finally, Ricky

retired and Joey moved up to take his place. The second fighter is chosen yearly from one of the Kino schools which made for a huge influx of students– all wanting to be the one chosen to fight in a Kino Challenge. To be fair, the Kino schools sponsored tournaments, local, state, regional, semi-finals and the championship to determine the man who would fight in the challenge. Again, all this revenue went to the *Heal the World Foundation*, and Angel Lee's *Angel Network Foundation*.

Because of the Kino challenge, the Kino empire, a large conglomerate in the first place, had doubled. Master Kane's school was one of over four hundred. Today, eight students tested, four boys, two girls, one man and one woman. The highest rank being sought today was red belt, with Logan and one of the girls testing for it. Though today was not a black belt test, it was treated as very important, and it was to the ones being tested.

Near the end of the testing, each student was interviewed to determine where their mind was at in conjunction with martial arts. Being a devout Christian, it was important to Grandmaster Kino that integrity, honor, compassion and honesty be an integral part of the martial artists his school produced.

During the testing, Mark's eyes had continually strayed to Bella. Now, while Master Kane and Eric handled the interviews, he waited quietly along with everyone else, and he allowed himself to look his fill. Chewing on her lower lip, she smoothed her hair back from her face and rocked back and forth in her chair. She wore a flowing, floral skirt, with ruffles at the hem. Not flamboyant or sexy, it came to around mid-calf. So why did she look so alluring?

She had on flat sandals and a white gauzy blouse, and to him, she looked like an angel. Her hair was down from her usual ponytail. She'd parted the straight, black tresses on the side and brushed them out of her face, but they kept falling forward. Mark had a sudden vision of those same black locks falling around his face as she leaned forward over him.

"Master Mark," Master Kane said loudly.

Mark snapped to, swallowing hard as he pulled himself from the scene. Mark looked at him, questioning. "I'm sorry?"

"Did you have any words to say to the class before we dismiss?"

Mark stood, gave a short speech about working hard on their own

time and never giving up. A few minutes later, Master Kane dismissed the class, telling them they will know if they'd been promoted within a few days at most.

"Time to party," JoJo exclaimed as the kids and parents laughed.

JoJo approached Logan and playfully put him into a headlock. "You did great, Logan. How does it feel to be a red belt?"

"I don't know if I made it yet," Logan said cautiously.

"Trust me, you did," JoJo assured him. "Come on. Let's get our stuff and get to the party. You wanna ride with us?"

"Naw, I'll ride with my mom."

JoJo nodded. "That's cool. See you there."

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Following Mark, Bella drove through the security gates and up the long, curving drive that led to the Kino estate on the beach. The lushness of the green front lawn along with the beautiful fall flowers combined with the large fountain took her breath away.

"Oh, look, Logan," she said, pointing toward a grouping of fiery orange mums. "It's beautiful here."

Logan nodded, peering up at his mom. She was smiling and happy and suddenly she seemed so young. "Yeah, it's cool," he answered.

When the driveway split, Bella was directed toward the circle that led to the front of the house. She parked and as she and Logan started toward the house the door opened and a beautiful lady smiled and waved. As other cars pulled into the drive, Bella and Logan were greeted at the door.

"Hi, I'm Shelley Kino," she beamed, offering her hand. "I'm JoJo's grandma and Master Mark's mother."

Bella smiled and extended her hand. "Hello, Mrs. Kino. I'm Bella Landow and this is my son, Logan."

"How nice to meet you, but please, you must call me Shelley." She turned to the young man standing next to Bella. "Hi Logan."

"Hi," he said shyly.

Shelley smiled up at Bella. "I met Logan last week at the hospital when Eric was hurt."

"I hear he's doing much better."

"He is, thank goodness. He's coming today. Actually, he should be here any minute."

Mark and JoJo jogged up the steps. Mark kissed his mother on the

cheek. "Mom," he said. "I see you've met Bella."

"Yes, I have. Bella, Gordon Landow is your husband?" Shelley asked, taking note of the slight face Logan made.

"Yes. Do you know him?" Bella asked.

"I only know of him. He couldn't come today?"

"He had a golf date with a client and then some briefs to work on."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you didn't let that keep you away. You two come on in. The party will be out back, so please come on through and make yourselves at home."

Bella smiled. "I'll feel so much more at home if you'll let me help."

Shelley gazed into her eyes and nodded. "I can always use help. JoJo, you man the door and greet your guests."

"Yes, ma'am," JoJo answered. "Logan, you wanna stay with me?"

"Sure."

Shelley led Bella through the house as Mark followed. They went through the dining room doors to the giant deck. She put Bella right to work, shooing Mark away. Mark knew with his mother, Bella was in good hands. He worked on unfolding more tables and setting out chairs while Bella and Shelley helped the caterers by spreading tablecloths, arranging flowers and placing trays of food on the tables.

Finished with his part, Mark stood off to the side and watched as Bella smoothed her hair back from her face again. She smiled and said something to his mother which made her laugh. His mother reached up and pulled a small clasp from her own hair and then had Bella be still while she clipped a small lock of Bella's hair back from her face. Shelley gave Bella's hair a loving pat and nodded in approval. Bella smiled at her and Mark's heart turned over in his chest.

He couldn't keep himself from watching her. She moved slowly, as if in a dream. Each movement, each gesture she made, was graceful, beautiful, careful, fluid yet deliberate. Gentle. That was really what it was. She was the epitome of gentleness. Suddenly, her eyes lifted and met his. Her eyebrows rose in question.

He came forward.

"Is something wrong?" Bella asked.

"Not a thing," he said softly. "I just want you to know that sometime today, I need to talk to you."

"Oh. About Logan?"

"No. But it's important."

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

"I care about you, Bella. Please, trust me."

Shelley butted in before Bella could refuse. "Well, Bella, did you bring a swimsuit?"

"I'm wearing it." She tugged on the gauzy white shirt. "This is actually my coverup."

"Really? And this is mine," Shelley said, tugging on her own pink shirt. "So, let's go lose the rest of the clothes. I always like to talk one female into getting into their swimsuit at the same time as me. That way I don't feel so self-conscious."

Bella looked over the woman who, if she was Mark's mother, had to be in her fifties. She had a perfect figure. Unlike other women her age, she had long hair which she wore in a long braid. It appeared to be the same light brown color as Mark's with maybe a few gray hairs mixed in. She was beautiful and could pass for thirty-something easily and Bella liked her immensely.

"Come on, we'll change in the pool house," Shelley said, pulling Bella with her.

Once they'd removed their outer clothing, Bella couldn't help but stare at Shelley Kino's body. It was perfect in every way. She put everyone else to shame. She had not even one ounce of flab or fat, but she wasn't skinny. She was muscular, toned, and could model on any fitness magazine. Even her stomach muscles were defined.

When they emerged a few minutes later, the place was overflowing with people. Bella's eyes traveled over the multi-tiered deck, the pool and finally, a sand volleyball pit. She'd known the Kinos were extremely wealthy. What she didn't expect was for them to be so down to earth. So real. And Mark's mother was a true treasure. She was so kind and loving and humble.

Bella peered toward the ocean and located her son with a few other kids down on the beach. She looked up to see Mark coming toward her, a smile on his face.

"You two look beautiful," he said. "I think you put all the other females to shame."

Bella tugged self-consciously on her white gauzy coverup which she'd left unbuttoned. It hit her at mid-thigh. Underneath she wore a black two-piece.

"Okay, back to work," Shelley said. "Let's see, I think I'm gonna need a few more platters."

"I'll get them for you," Bella quickly volunteered.

Shelley smiled at her. "Thanks, hon, that would be great. Mark, why don't you help her. I think I'd like two more. There are a few left on that top shelf in the pantry. Actually, bring as many as there are left."

Bella headed around the pool and toward the house with Mark right behind her. She entered through the expansive dining room where the large motorized glass wall had been left open to accommodate traffic.

Mark touched his hand to the small of her back. "This way," he said, turning her to the left.

They walked through the kitchen to the far side, passed a smaller dining area with a perfect view of the ocean, until Mark moved forward and opened a set of double doors. The pantry, Bella thought, was big enough to be another room. It housed a large freezer chest and second refrigerator and two freestanding stainless steel wire shelving units that held dish sets, industrial pots and pans, and elaborate serving dishes.

Bella spotted the platters and stood on her tiptoes and reached up way over her head.

Mark moved up behind her. "Let me get those."

He reached up and stopped. His eyes fell on her bare shoulder where the coverup had fallen away. A fresh bruise marked the skin there on the back of her shoulder. He touched her there and she flinched.

"How did that happen?" he asked, though he knew the answer.

She didn't turn around, only bent her head. "Whatever are you talking about?" she whispered.

"Bella, I know what's going on in your home, in your marriage."

She didn't say anything in response. What could she say? To deny it would be silly. She could feel him behind her. She could feel his warmth, his strength. He'd told her to trust him, and heaven help her, she did, still, it was so hard to open up. She flinched again when his hand softly brushed over the sore bruise.

"You have a bruise here, Bella. I bet you didn't realize it was here. You wouldn't be able to see it in the mirror. You're careful. You're always so careful to make sure no one sees. To make sure no one

knows. But I know, Bella. And I want to help you."

She shook her head. "I don't want your pity."

"I'm not sure you can call it pity, Bella, but I do hurt for you, and for Logan. I care about you."

"Why? You barely know me."

His hand moved over the bruise again and she felt such warmth she almost swooned. He cares about me, she thought. Maybe he wouldn't care if he knew the fantasies she had about him with her being a married woman. Having him so close made her entire body tingle and come alive. She was so tempted to lean back against him, lean herself against all that hard warmth.

"I know you well enough, Bella. I've known you for two years. I know you're sweet and shy. I know you're a wonderful mother and I can't stand the thought of that idiot husband of yours hurting you."

She couldn't help it. The tears welled up and spilled over.

He turned her around to face him, lifted her chin. "Oh, hell, I've made you cry. Oh, sweetheart, I never meant to make you cry." His thumbs brushed away at the tears, but his eyes focused where one tear had run into the corner of her mouth. Before he knew what he was doing, he used his thumb to brush at the moistness.

When Bella didn't push him away, he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers, softly, gently. A new flood of tears hit his thumbs and he pulled away. "Bella, I am so sorry. Please, forgive me. Lord forgive me, I'm a weak man. Don't cry. Shh, shh."

She wiped her own tears on the back of her hands and gave a soft laugh. "Please, don't apologize. Really. Lately, I cry at the drop of a hat. I don't even know what's wrong with me. Must be some kind of hormonal change."

"Then you forgive me for kissing you?"

"You mean for making me feel like a woman for the first time in forever? Yeah, you're forgiven."

He smiled. "We need to talk, Bella. This is hardly the time and place, but sometime today, before you go home, we need to find some time alone and have a talk."

She nodded. "Maybe it's time."

He blew out a breath in relief.

She smiled sadly at him. "It's a thumb mark."

"Huh?"

She touched her shoulder. "It's a thumb mark. He pinches down hard on my shoulder, like the Vulcan death grip or something, to get me to do what he wants me to do."

Mark's jaw clenched so hard he could barely speak. He brushed a hand gently over her cheek. "What was he trying to get you to do?"

She shivered. "Oh, uh, he wanted me— on my knees. "

He sighed. "Okay, and when did this happen?"

"Yesterday morning. Why?"

"It's not important right now. We have a lot to talk about."

"Well, there you two are," Shelley said, standing in the doorway of the pantry. "Thought maybe you got lost."

"Oh, uh, sorry, Mom," Mark uttered.

Bella quickly swiped at her eyes once more to make sure no tears remained. "Sorry, Ms. Kino, we got to talking."

"It's Shelley, remember? Okay, hand me those platters, Mark."

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For the second time in a week, Logan laughed so hard the soda he'd been drinking came out his nose, which brought on another round of laughter from the group of kids. Logan choked and JoJo slapped him on the back several times.

"I don't think that's helping," young Eric said as he watched from his place in the sand.

"At least I didn't toss him into the ocean," JoJo said.

Eric shrugged. "I figure if I can't go swimming, I want someone to do it for me."

"So how you feelin' anyway?" Alan, a kid who lived just down the beach asked.

Eric shrugged. "I feel okay, I guess. Feel pretty bad about gettin' surprised like that, though. I never saw it coming."

"Well, you were distracted by, uh, things," Logan said, cupping his hands over his chest, which received another round of laughter.

"That would be two things," JoJo corrected.

"Shoot, speakin' of, uh, girls, look who decided to come down from the pool," Eric said.

The boys turned to watch a group of five girls coming down toward the beach.

"Who you want, Eric?" JoJo asked. "I mean, you're injured so you get first pick."

"I'll take one of the blondes," he said quickly.

"I'll take Maya," JoJo said.

Logan frowned. Maya was a Polynesian girl from their class and the only girl he knew at the party.

"Who you want?" JoJo asked.

Logan shrugged. "Whoever will have me."

"No, bro, that ain't the way it goes," young Eric said. "You gotta have some confidence. You gotta step up and decide which one you want. Like you did the other night."

"I don't know any of them."

"Neither do I," Eric said. "And you didn't know those girls at the pizza place either."

"Okay, well, the other blonde is cute."

"That's who I was gonna take," Alan complained.

"You shoulda spoke up," JoJo informed him. "My friend Logan claims the blonde."

Logan started to tell Alan he could have the girl but the females arrived about that time.

"Hey Eric," they said, all five focusing in on the wounded young man. "We heard you got attacked by some skate punks and ended up in the hospital. Are you feeling better?"

Eric grinned. "Better now that you're all here."

JoJo rolled his eyes, more at the girls' interest in Eric rather than at his cousin's stupid line, though he wasn't really jealous. Eric always got a lot of attention because of his parents. JoJo knew it bothered his cousin to not ever know if someone liked him just for him.

"So, what are you girls up to?" JoJo asked.

They giggled. "We just thought that maybe we'd come on down and play in the waves."

"That's cool," JoJo said before he looked directly at his girl of choice. "Hey Maya."

She smiled. "Hey."

"Come on in with me and I'll find you a shell."

"Okay."

JoJo glanced over at Logan. "Uh, Maya, I know you already know Logan from class but for the rest of you, this is Logan. He's a good friend of mine and Eric's."

Logan looked up at JoJo as if he were a god.

The girls stepped forward and introduced themselves to Logan.

"Oh, and this is Alan, another friend of mine." JoJo waited while everyone said 'hi' to everyone else. "So let's go swimming," he said, taking Maya by the hand.

Logan could only look on with admiration. He glanced over his shoulder. Eric had already struck up a conversation with one of the blondes, so Logan smiled at the other one. "Um, you wanna go swimming?"

She smiled. "Sure."

They walked side by side into the water.

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"Have either of you seen Bella?"

Both Shelley and Eric nodded toward the beach. A lone figure in a black bikini walked slowly along the beach. The sun was beginning to set and everyone else had come in, eaten their fill and settled down to playing pool games. Most of the adults lounged around the pool and at the bar, enjoying the Kinos' hospitality.

Mark nodded. "Well, I guess that means it's time." He glanced back at his mother and stepfather.

Eric nodded. "Be gentle but firm."

Mark nodded, drew a deep breath, blew it out and straightened his shoulders. "I'll do my best."

Shelley watched her son as he walked down toward the beach. "He's in love with her," she said softly.

Eric nodded. "Yeah, it's a tough situation."

Shelley sighed. When she'd cornered her husband about Bella earlier, he'd told her about the state of affairs. Bella was such a gentle soul. Shelley hoped Mark would be able to talk some sense into her. So many women just don't understand or maybe don't believe that there are ways out of bad situations.

Bella looked up as Mark approached. Her hands wrung together nervously. She smiled at him, and he tried to keep his eyes on her face but couldn't avoid a quick sweep of her entire lovely self. She was slim, pale, ethereal. There were no traces of the child she'd once carried. Her coloring actually reminded him of JoJo's mother who'd come so quickly into his life and left just as fast. Only Beth's black hair hadn't been natural. She'd been in disguise.

"Water cold?" Mark asked.

"It's freezing," she replied and walked toward an outcropping of rocks to grab her coverup.

He watched her as she put it on, then looked up at him expectantly. "Let's walk," he said uncomfortably.

Turning silently, they headed south, away from the house.

Mark drew a breath and plunged in. He didn't have a lot of time. "I know that you're being abused."

Bella nodded. "I realize that we've established that. So, what else is there to say? Poor Bella?"

"No. What I'm here to say is, it can't go on."

"Well, I'll just run home and tell that to Gordon."

"Bella, don't be defensive. Please, I'm here to help you."

She sighed. "I know. I'm sorry. I guess it's just my way of venting."

"Do you love him?"

Silence ensued for several moments.

"I did once. Or at least I thought I did. But he's killed any feelings I may have had for him."

Mark nodded and breathed a sigh of relief, realizing he'd been holding his breath as he waited for that all-important answer. "How long has it been going on?"

"Oh, a very long time," she murmured.

He waited, silently urging her to elaborate.

She shrugged. "At first it was just a slap, or a push. A yank on my hair. Then he'd apologize and I'd forgive him. Logan was just a baby then. I don't know why it started. I'm still not quite sure what I did to make him turn on me."

"You didn't do anything. It's not your fault. It's him. It's all him."

"I gained a lot of weight with Logan. I think it embarrassed him."

He circled around in front of her and took her by the shoulders. "Did you even hear what I said? It's not your fault. You have to make him responsible for his actions. Women gain weight in childbirth. He has no right to hit you, for whatever reason."

She nodded. "Mentally, I know that. Emotionally, I keep thinking, if I'd only done this right or that right."

He ran his hands up and down her arms and shook his head. "It's him, Bella. It doesn't matter what you do right. He'll always find a reason. It's him. So, when did it escalate?"

She sighed. "The first really bad time was Christmas Day when Logan was two. I was so tired and I just didn't want to have— sex. He beat me. He beat me and he raped me. He blackened my eye, he put stripes on my back with his belt, he loosened two of my teeth. I stayed hidden for two weeks waiting for the bruises to go away. He had to go to a special New Year's party and I couldn't go looking like I did, so, he went alone. He didn't come home that night and I knew he went home with another woman."

"How did you know?"

"He made no effort to hide it and I could smell her perfume on his tux. He had her glove in his pocket. He talked about her, about the things she did to him, and told me from now on, I would be doing those same things. He worked hard, he deserved to be treated like a man."

"Oh, Bella."

She shrugged.

"If Logan was two, then that was about nine years ago. Why have you stayed?"

"I have no choice. About two weeks after my parents' funeral, Gordon and I had a big fight. He hurt me pretty bad and when I woke the next morning, I realized he could possibly kill me or hurt Logan, so I told him I was leaving him. I started packing my bags and then went into Logan's room to get him up." She stopped, shivered.

"And?" Mark urged gently.

"He was gone. I guess he knew how I would react."

"I turned around in a panic and Gordon was standing there by Logan's bedroom door, his arms folded across his chest, smiling in that way that told me he was enjoying my pain. I screamed at him. Told him to give me my son. He said I'd never see him again. I went running through the house, searched everywhere, but he wasn't there. I begged, I cried. I actually got on my knees and promised I'd never again try to leave him. He finally gave in. He made a phone call and a few minutes later a man drove up to the house and brought Logan to the door." She looked up at Mark. "Can you understand now, why I can't leave?"

"Logan's not a baby anymore. He can hardly hide an eleven-year-old boy who doesn't want to be hidden."

"He said if I tried to leave him he'd take Logan from me. You don't know him. He's powerful. I don't have a choice but to stay."

"You have a choice, Bella." When she started to disagree, he asked

another question. “If I told you, we can get you out, and you won’t lose custody of Logan, would you be willing to leave him?”

She shook her head.

“Why not?” Mark asked angrily.

“He’d kill me. I know it. He’ll kill me or have someone kill me. And then, what would happen to Logan?”

“Bella, he won’t kill you. There are places you can go where he’ll never find you.”

“And what then, Mark? Am I supposed to run and hide the rest of my life?”

“No. Then we prosecute.”

She backed away from him, her eyes wide. “Prosecute?” A short burst of laughter escaped her. “Prosecute Gordon? I have no proof. First he’d humiliate me and then he’d kill me. And believe me when I say, I don’t care about the humiliation, but I do care about Logan.”

“And so do I. What do you think he’s going through? He watches his father hurt his mother and he feels helpless and he feels guilty.”

Bella’s head bowed. Mark came to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She looked up, the tears now flowing. “I don’t know what to do,” she muttered. “I just don’t know.”

He pulled her against his chest and let her cry while he held her tight and ran his hand back and forth over her back. Leaning down, he kissed her temple and murmured comforting words until she finally quieted.

“There is a way out, sweet Bella,” he said softly. “We’ll find a way.”

She shook her head. “I’m afraid.”

“I’m afraid too. I’m afraid that one day I’ll get a call telling me you’re dead, and I don’t want you to die, Bella, because I care for you. Do you understand what I’m saying? I care deeply– for *you*.”

Her eyes met his. “You do?” she asked as if coming out of a trance.

“I do. Isn’t it obvious?”

“I don’t know. How can you?”

“Because, Bella, you’re a sweet, kind, gentle, intelligent, beautiful woman. One who deserves happiness. I want to give you that.”

Her mouth fell open.

“Don’t look so worried. I don’t intend to do anything that would

jeopardize you in any way. I do, however, intend to get you out of the danger you're in. We'll see what happens after that."

She looked out over the water as the sun went down. The surface of the water was as orange as the sky. Suddenly she turned to him, eyes wide as if she had a great secret to tell. "I think about you sometimes."

He searched her face, feeling suddenly delighted by her confession. "You do? What do you mean?" he asked with a smile.

"I wonder what it would be like to have you coming home to me at dinner time instead of Gordon. I know it's naughty, but I can't help it. I've watched you in class. You're so kind and patient. You're so calm."

He tried not to let what she said affect him too much. She was desperately in need of a protector and so those feelings may be somewhat misconstrued. Still, it was a nice fantasy and he decided to play with it. "I'd come home and take a deep breath and say, 'man oh man something smells good.' Then I'd lift up the lid of the pot that's simmering and steal a taste. Then you'd smack my hand and fuss at me and I'd laugh." His voice deepened. "And I'd pull you close, Bella, and kiss you."

She swallowed, keeping her eyes on his.

"And you would turn off the stove and pull me into our bedroom and we would make love until there would be a knock on the door and JoJo and Logan would say they're hungry."

Bella laughed.

Smiling, he took her hand and sighed. "So, Bella, fantasies aside, we have to come to a decision about what we're gonna do to get you out of your situation."

"Nothing's changed, Mark. I don't see how I can leave."

"Good grief, Bella, I'm telling you, there are ways. Just give me the go ahead and I'll find a place for you. I'll go to court and get a restraining order. We'll have a hearing over child custody. We can show that Logan may be in danger. There are things that you don't know about that are happening to gather evidence against him. I'm not allowed to disclose those things right now, but you have to trust me."

"I do trust you, Mark." She stepped away, put a hand to her forehead. "What do you mean gathering evidence against him? Who?"

"I'm not at liberty to say right now, but someone is, Bella. I'm not the only one who can see what's going on. There will be evidence. Just

tell me you want out and I'll get you out."

She stood thinking for a time, everything rushing around in her brain. Someone is gathering evidence against Gordon? How could they do that without being present in their home? Does Gordon know it? If so, does he think it's her that arranged it? Could she really be able to leave him and retain custody of Logan? Does she dare even hope? She gazed up into Mark's kind eyes. "Okay, just let me think about it. Let me think. Give me a few days. I don't want to rush into anything. I've survived this long, I'll survive another few days."

He blew out a breath. "Think long and hard, Bella. You leave him and come to me for protection, I promise, I won't let anything happen to you or Logan. I may not be a big, powerful attorney like he is, but I do have a powerful family, a very powerful family, and we have just as many friends in high places as he does."

She smiled at him. "You've given me so much."

"I haven't given you anything yet."

"You've given me hope." She looked up as Logan came running down to the beach.

"Mom," Logan cried, panic in his voice. "Mom, Dad is on the Kinos' house phone. He said he tried to reach you several times but you're not answering your cell phone and he wants to speak to you."

"Oh, no," Bella said, her chin quivering. "I haven't even thought about my phone. It's in my purse in the pool house."

"Bella," Mark began.

"No," she said quickly, cutting him off. "I have to go. Logan, get your things. We have to go right now."

Mark watched her run up toward the house in a panic. He dug in his pocket, pulled out his phone, dialed Joey. "Hey, she's on the way home and he's angry with her for not answering her phone. She's panicked and she's scared."

"I know. Did you speak with her?"

"Yes. She says she now has hope but she wants to think about things. Damn it, Joey, he could kill her."

"I got it, Mark. It won't be tonight."

✝✝✝

Colossians 3:19

"Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them."

Chapter Five

Joey waited for Bella and Logan to drive by before he started his engine. Should he need to, he would back out from the shrubbery he'd parked behind, charge around the curve and up the driveway. He was pretty sure all hell was about to break loose, since at this minute Gordon Landow paced the foyer, slapping his hand down on the stair banister several times as he passed it. He'd slammed the phone down thirty minutes earlier after finally speaking with his wife and had since remained in an agitated state.

Joey's phone buzzed and he punched a button. "Yo."

"Is she there yet?" Mark asked.

"Not yet. Mark, you have to calm down and let me do my job."

"What's he doing?"

"He's pacing. He's agitated and things are probably gonna get ugly, but I'm ready."

"What if she locks the door? How will you get in?"

"I have a key we made from the one Breez had, now chill. Here she comes. Gotta go."

"Ugh, Joey, can you leave the phone line open so I can hear?"

"Yes."

Joey moved toward the drive as Bella and Logan got out of the car and walked toward the front door. The moment they stepped inside, he turned off his lights and pulled up the driveway.

Bella opened the door and walked in with Logan right behind her. Gordon stood waiting by the stair banister, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes glittering with fury.

Bella looked up, startled. "Oh, uh, hello, Gordon."

"So, you finally decided to come home."

She swallowed hard, but she couldn't keep her voice from shaking anyway. "You knew we were going to the party after Logan's belt test."

"That test began ten hours ago. I don't remember you saying the party would last for ten hours."

"Dad, the testing wasn't over until noon. The party didn't start until about one o'clock."

Gordon glared at his son. "Go to your room."

"No."

Bella gasped audibly, her eyes now large with fear.

"You're becoming more and more like your mother. You damn well better go to your room!"

"No. I won't let you hurt Mom."

Gordon reached out and snatched Logan by the front of his shirt and pulled him close. "I don't know what your mother has been telling you, but if you think you can speak to me that way, I'll..."

"Logan!" Bella cried. "Please, just go to your room!" Her voice was hysterical, she knew, and she tried to calm herself.

Gordon let him go. Logan turned to peer at his mother, his chin lifted. She nodded at him and he took off up the stairs. Bella drew in a relieved breath. Her eyes moved to meet Gordon's stare.

"Look at you. You're not even dressed."

Bella gazed down at her body. "I'm wearing a bathing suit. It was a beach party, Gordon. You know that. When I got your call, I didn't bother to pull my skirt back on. I just came home. Isn't that what you wanted? Isn't that what you told me to do?"

He came closer. "Don't you dare throw my words back at me. You want to spar verbally, I guarantee you'll lose since you don't know how to use the brains God gave you. Now tell me, did you swim? Did you take off your little shirt there and show off your body to all the men?"

Trembling, she ran a hand over her hair. "No, I mean, yes, I went swimming, but I wasn't showing off my body."

"Take your shirt off."

"What?"

"Take– your– shirt– off."

As the tears ran down her face, she unbuttoned her coverup and let it fall.

Gordon moved close, his eyes roaming over her. "I bet your little friend Mark Adams enjoyed seeing you in this."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"Who else was there?"

"Shelley Kino and..."

"I meant what other men."

"Oh, well, there was Grandmaster Kino and Mark and Master Kane and Ricky Kino and some of the other fathers of the kids in the class. I don't know all of their names."

"I see. And you walked around flaunting yourself like this in front of all those people?"

"Everyone had on bathing suits, Gordon, not just me."

"Really? Well, tell you what, you want to swim so bad and show your body off all hours of the night, go get in the pool."

"Gordon, please, I don't want to swim."

"Oh, but you did, didn't you? Now suddenly you don't just because I told you to do it? You're defiant, Bella. You've always been defiant. That's where Logan is getting his attitude. Do you see what you're teaching him?"

She snapped. "What about what you're teaching him?" she shouted before she could stop herself.

The backhand came quickly and knocked her to the floor. Whimpering, she moved slowly around to get her feet underneath her and pick herself up before he could kick her.

Joey jumped from his car. By the time he came through the front door there was no one in sight and no sound. Looking at the stairs he didn't think Gordon would've had time to drag Bella all the way up. Joey darted toward the back of the house and heard a sound like a splash. He burst from the house into the backyard. Gordon knelt by the pool, his hands pushing down on something in the water. Joey knew that something was Bella.

"Hey! There you are!"

Gordon looked up, startled to see Breez's new boyfriend coming out of his house. He pulled Bella up and out of the water. She coughed and sputtered, moving quickly out of his grasp.

"What the hell are you doing in my home?" Gordon asked.

Joey smiled. "Oh, well, sorry to interrupt you two playing in the pool this time of night, but Breez said she'd meet me here. No one answered the door and since it was open, I came on in. Sorry, it seems I'm always intruding on you love birds." Joey eyed Bella as he talked to make sure she was okay. "I take it Breez isn't here yet?"

"No, she isn't here and why would she have you meet her here?"

Joey shrugged. "Search me. She told me to meet her here at eight." He eyed his watch. "She's late as usual, but then, so was I."

Joey smiled at Bella. “Water’s a little cool this time of year, huh?”

Shivering, Bella nodded. “Yes. I think I’ll go get dry.” She disappeared quietly.

“So, like, you don’t mind if I wait for Breez, do you, Gordon?”

Gordon walked toward the house. “You can wait in the den, but let me tell you something, Adams. I really don’t like you, and I don’t appreciate you just letting yourself into my house. Breez was always a strange, irresponsible girl and I don’t know what she sees in you, but get it out of your mind that we’re family now, because we are most definitely not. Now, I’m going up to change.”

Grinning, Joey gave a mock salute and made himself at home, listening intently for any sound coming from the bedroom upstairs. A few minutes later, Bella came down wearing shorts and a t-shirt and her hair wrapped in a towel. Her lower lip was swollen, but she offered a quick smile.

Joey decided he’d wait for Breez’s feigned entrance for at least a couple of hours. That should give Gordon a chance to cool off.

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The following Wednesday at Ameritech, Jason watched the recording. “He really doesn’t like you,” Jason said with a smile.

“I’m crushed. Just wait until he finds out he’s been had.”

Jason shook his head. “I don’t like the way this is headed. I want her out of the house. You can charge in and save the day only so many times. He’s always gonna get in that first hit and then there’s the quiet abuse that we don’t hear or see.”

Joey nodded. He certainly didn’t need Jason to explain that. He remembered too well the silent rape he’d heard.

Jason went on to clarify what he meant. “I spoke with Mark. He said she had a bruise on her shoulder from Friday morning when Gordon forced her to her knees.” He glanced at the silent woman seated by the window. “Oh, um, sorry, Ms. Sheridan.”

Breez waved away his apology.

Joey let out a heavy sigh.

“Mark feels like he made some headway in getting her to consider leaving but she wanted time to think about it,” Jason continued.

Joey grimaced. “She’s a sweet lady, but a stubborn woman.”

Jason shrugged. “Well, abusers manipulate. He’s had years to play on her fears. She believes he’ll not only take Logan away from her,

he'll kill her."

Breez suddenly stood and walked to Jason's desk. "I'm going over there. I have to try to talk to her again." She looked back and forth between both men. "I'll go tonight."

"I don't want you there when he's home," Joey said.

"I'm not afraid of that pig," she answered.

"Nevertheless, I want you to stay away from him," Joey said firmly but quietly, his eyes boring into hers.

Jason watched this exchange, his mouth pressed tightly together.

"Fine," Breez capitulated. "I'll go this afternoon before he gets home. Now that Bella knows there are others standing by ready to support her, maybe I can make some headway with her."

"It's worth another try. This guy is a powder keg waiting to go off," Jason said.

Breez nodded. "Hopefully, I'll be able to make a difference. I have some errands to run before I see my sister. If you'll excuse me."

Jason stood and shook her hand. "Stay in touch."

Breez glanced at Joey. "I promise."

Joey stood. "I will, um, see Ms. Sheridan to her car."

Jason frowned at him. "Yeah, you do that, Agent Adams, and then I'll see you back in my office."

Joey knew that tone. Jason was not a happy camper and Joey had a feeling he knew what Jason was upset about, and Joey didn't relish facing the man. He held the door for Breez and ushered her out and onto the elevator. She jumped him.

Her mouth was on his in a flash, her leg hitched up and propped on his hip. He moaned and kissed her hard before he had the strength to push her away. Pouting, she leaned close, placed her hands on his chest.

"What's wrong?" she whined.

"Nothing's wrong. I feel though that I should warn you there are cameras in this elevator."

Breez smiled, looked up to find the camera. "I don't see any."

"That doesn't mean they aren't there."

She pouted.

Joey smiled. "I do want you Breez, never doubt that, however, I want more."

"More? What are you talking about? Like you wanna go steady?"

"Like, how about having dinner with me next week?"

"Dinner?" She grinned. "At my house?" she asked suggestively.

He sighed. "No. In a restaurant."

Her brow creased. "Somehow, Joey, I didn't think of you as the fancy restaurant, wine and dine type."

The elevator doors opened and Joey took her elbow to lead her out.

"Who said anything about fancy? There's a place I like, *The Bayside Grill*, are you game?"

"Sure, except I don't want you to take a night off from protecting my sister."

"Okay, and I agree. Let's just see what you're able to accomplish with Bella this afternoon."

He walked her to her car, held her door, but she turned and leaned against the side. "I'm not leaving without a decent goodbye."

Moving forward he pressed her against the car and gave in to the moment, kissing her hard. Her hands snaked around his neck and she gave a soft moan. When he pulled away she was breathless.

He smiled. "That– is a very pretty picture. Bye Breez." Turning, he headed back to Jason's office.

Jason was placing his signature on a few papers for Mina as Joey eased down into a chair opposite the desk. Mina left and Jason's eyes met Joey's. Joey knew immediately that Jason was furious and waited bravely for the thunder that was about to roll.

"I've known you since you were six years old."

Joey nodded.

"I've watched you grow into an extraordinary young man, an amazing martial artist and become my top agent. Your work has been irreproachable and I've never regretted my decision to train you to one day take over my job at the head of this company."

Joey remained silent.

"So, I am finding it unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable, that you would put my company, our company, my family's future, in jeopardy because you can't keep your..." He stopped and drew a breath to calm down. "Because you can't stay in control of your hormones."

The slight closing of Joey's eyes was the only sign that he'd even heard that Jason had begun to say something coarse, and Joey knew Jason had to be over-the-top pissed in order for him to be crude and he wisely kept his mouth shut.

"You know the policies of this company. You know they were set up for a reason. You've put the future of Ameritech in the hands of a young socialite. Do you deny it?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"Did you intend to tell me?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

Jason's eyes bore into Joey's. "What were you thinking, Joseph? I can't believe you have such little control over yourself."

Joey shook his head. "Really, Uncle Jason, I find it as hard to believe as you. It took me by surprise."

"So, what, then? The chemical reaction was so strong, you threw all caution to the wind?" Jason asked sarcastically. "And don't think that I don't know that you just called me Uncle Jason to remind me of the cute little boy I used to babysit."

Joey smiled and shrugged. "It was worth a try. But really, Jason, it's more than a chemical reaction to Breez. I have feelings for her."

"Feelings? You have feelings?"

Joey blew out a breath. "I— think I may be falling in love with her."

"Love." Jason stood silently, shaking his head. He understood that. He knew how strong his feelings were for his own wife. A few years earlier he'd had another agent, Jefferson Davis, fall madly in love with a woman he'd been assigned to protect. They were now happily married. It seems all one of his men had to do was mention the "L" word and all was forgiven. He cursed quietly and nodded at Joey. "Just make sure you're at the Landow house before Ms. Sheridan gets there. You'd better take good care of her, Joey. She holds much power right now."

"She wouldn't do anything to hurt this company."

"Now, we don't know that, do we?"

Joey had to be honest. "Well, no, sir, we don't know. I mean, it's just a feeling."

Jason rolled his eyes. "Feelings. Get outta here."

Joey obeyed quickly.

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"Breez! I'm so glad to see you. Come in! Why are you here?"

"You're my sister, Bella, do I have to have a reason?"

Bella smiled nervously. "No, of course not, it's just that, well, you

hardly ever come by anymore."

"That might be because that jerk of a husband makes it clear he doesn't want me around and I usually go along with it so as not to cause you any trouble. He hates me, but I hate him more," she said with a wicked smile. "He isn't home, is he?"

"No, but Breez, he doesn't hate you."

"Don't defend him, Bella. It falls on deaf ears and he's why I'm here to talk to you. Where's Logan?"

"He's doing his homework upstairs."

"Good. Let's go in the kitchen, have some coffee and eat some of your glorious chocolate cake."

Bella grinned. "What makes you think there is any?"

"Is there?"

"Yes," Bella laughed.

"Thank God," Breez murmured, taking Bella by the arm and leading her into the kitchen.

They sat together at a long counter, sipping strong coffee and eating cake. Breez allowed herself one more delicious sigh before she put her fork down. "Okay, Bells, we need to talk."

Bella sighed. She dreaded these discussions. "Breez, there's really nothing to discuss."

"Oh, but there is. It's time, Bella, for all the nonsense to stop. It's time to put away your pride and get help. I'm not gonna talk around it anymore. Your lowlife husband beats on you. Forget that it's one of the most despicable things a man can do, it's against the law and it has to stop. No more. The end."

Bella shook her head. "It's not like you think."

"Stop it, Bella. Or wake up. Or something. Have you looked in the mirror? Your mouth is still a little swollen."

Bella rubbed her fingers over her lip. "How did you know?"

"Joey told me."

"But how..."

"Ugh, I just want to kill the man. So no more pretending, sis. No more. This isn't a game. He's gonna end up killing you if you don't get out. I'm not gonna let him win."

She pushed her confusion aside for a moment. "I can't just *go*, Breez. I've told you, he'll take Logan from me."

"What do you think all this is doing to Logan? Huh? Was he here

the other night when Gordon smacked you around?"

Bella's head hung. "Yes." She backed up, threw her hands out. "I don't know what to do," she whispered.

"You're getting out, that's what. What if Joey hadn't interfered Saturday night? Logan could've gotten up and found you floating in the pool Sunday morning."

Bella shuddered. "How do you know all this? Joey didn't act like he knew what was happening."

Breez clamped her lips together. Finally she let out a huge breath. "Bella, there are things you don't know."

Bella's eyes flashed. "Like what?"

"Okay, listen, Bella. I'll make you a deal. I'll tell you what's going on, but first you gotta talk to me. You tell me all the things he's done to you, tell me the whole story right now and I give you my word that I'll tell you everything."

Bella eyed her sister, nodded. Breez took her hand and for the next hour listened to a string of atrocities. Bella cried. Breez cried and cursed.

"Do you think he ever loved you?" Breez finally asked when she heard all that Bella had to say.

"I don't know. I know I used to love him, but no more. There's no feelings at all. I'm just numb."

"Bella, I have something, something I bought for you," Breez said, reaching for her bag. "Let's go upstairs to your room." Where there's no cameras, Breez thought.

Weary, Bella rose and they went up to her bedroom. They sat facing each other on the large, pristine bed. Breez reached into her bag and pulled out a small box, opened it and laid it on the bed. Bella gasped.

Breez's brows rose. "It's a Smith & Wesson Centennial 442 Airweight," Breez said proudly.

"Dear Lord Jesus," Joey exclaimed from where he sat in his car. "I ought to beat that woman." The irony of his words wasn't lost on him, but he was too angry to correct himself now. But oh, just wait until he got her alone.

When Bella didn't move, Breez took it out of the box for her. "It's a .38 calibre snubnose. The guy told me it was excellent for women. Not too heavy, not too much kickback, or whatever they call it."

"Oh, Breez, I could never use that."

"Sure you can. Look, this is how you load it."

"No, don't load it! I won't have a loaded gun in my house."

Breez continued to load the gun. "Well, unloaded it doesn't do you much good, Bella. If you're worried about Logan getting hold of it, keep it with you, like in your purse or something. Better safe than sorry."

"I don't think I could use it."

"You probably couldn't, not to save yourself, but you could to save Logan. Now watch and listen."

Bella watched nervously as Breez taught her how to load the gun and pull the trigger.

"You'll need to go to a class and really learn all about it, get a permit, but for now, please, just keep this with you."

Bella nodded. "I'll hide it in my dresser under my jeans." She rose and put it away immediately, jolting when she heard a noise in the hall. Face pale, she went to the bedroom door and peeked out into the hall, dreading that Gordon had come home early, but there was no one there. Blowing out a breath of relief, she came back to sit on the bed. "So, Breez, the gun, is that what you had to tell me when you said there's so much I don't know?"

Breez sighed. "No. There's more. Much more." She glanced at her watch. "What time does Gordon come home?"

"On Wednesdays Logan and I leave for our martial arts class at five so Gordon usually spends his Wednesday evening working late or going to the club for a workout and dinner."

"Hah, workout and dinner, huh? Lord, Bella, you must be the most naive person on the face of the earth."

"What are you saying?"

While Breez filled her in on what she meant, Joey called Jason.

"I'd like to set up a tail on Gordon. More than likely he's having an affair and that will give us plenty of ammo to use in the divorce. I know we have the camera in the car, but I'd like a witness on this."

"I'll arrange it."

"I know it's late, but I've just learned that tonight is his regular rendezvous time. Since it's almost five, if they can't tag him at the office, try the country club." Joey turned back to the conversation taking place in the house.

"Think about it, sis, has he ever given you a hard time about going to your little martial arts class on Wednesday night? No. Because he has his own plans on Wednesday night, and they don't include getting in an extra round of golf."

Bella sighed wearily. "I don't care anymore, Breez."

"Okay, sweetie, okay, don't go gettin' all despondent on me. Listen, don't be mad okay?"

"About what?"

"I went to Ameritech Security and hired them to protect you and to gather evidence so that Gordon won't be able to lie his way out of it. It wasn't a coincidence that Joey came to your house Saturday night. He's been watching you. They've set up surveillance cameras and microphones all through your house, Bella." When her sister made no effort to speak or yell, Breez went on. "He has video of Gordon hitting you and lots of audio of all the horrible things Gordon has said to you. Don't you understand, Bella? We have evidence. He's been caught with his pants down."

Bella merely sat, her haunted eyes staring blankly.

"Don't be mad, sis. I love you so much, and I couldn't stand the thought of him hurting you anymore. I thought, I can stand by and let him eventually kill you, or I can stand up and do something. So, if you want to hate me over this, that's okay, if it gets you out of here."

"How long?"

"How long?"

"Yes, Breez, how long have you had people watching me?"

"Long enough to document the hell you've been going through."

Bella turned her gaze toward the ceiling. "Where are the cameras?"

"There aren't any cameras in here. And none in your bathroom if modesty is what you're upset about, though there are microphones. Pretty much the rest of the house is covered. Bella, please, I'm sorry if you feel violated, but that small violation is gonna save your life. Don't you get it? We have proof. Plus the fact that without knowledge of the cameras you just told an incredible story."

Bella shook her head as if waking from a dream. "And just where does Joey Adams come into all of this? I thought he was an actor."

"Oh, yeah, that. He *used* to be an actor. Actually now he's a security agent for Ameritech. He's their t*op* agent."

"So you and Joey aren't really an item?"

Breez smiled. "No, not really." She took her sister's hand. "So are you mad?"

"Yes, I am."

"Okay, but are you gonna finally get out of this farce of a marriage?"

"I don't know what to do. I have to think."

"Are you freakin' kidding me? Do you like living like this?"

"No! I'm just scared, Breez. I'm scared, okay? I'm afraid to hope that it's actually possible to leave. I'll give you this, it does look like I might be able to plan my escape, but, I have to think to cover all the possibilities and I'm gonna want to talk to a lawyer." Suddenly she looked up. "Is Mark in on this?"

"In on it? If you mean does he work for Ameritech, the answer is no. If you mean does he know what's happening with you the answer is yes. Why? Is that so bad?"

"I'm not sure. He, he says he cares about me."

"Sis, members of the Kino family are like, paragons of virtue. I don't think Mark would say anything without meaning it. If you're worried that he was playing some part, the answer is definitely no."

"Damn," Joey said as Gordon Landow drove by. He pulled out his cell and began texting.

Breez glanced down when she heard her phone, fished it out of her bag and read the text. "Gordon is driving up the driveway."

Bella glanced at the clock. It was a few minutes after five. "Oh, no, I'm supposed to be gone." She sprang from the bed. "Logan! Honey, we have to leave, we're late."

Logan came out of his room, his bag slung over his shoulder. "I'm ready, I was just waiting on you. I knew you were talking to Aunt Breez." He smiled at his aunt. "Hi, Aunt Breez."

Breez hugged him quickly. "Hey, sweetie. Your dad is home. You two get going."

The three of them hurried down the stairs just as Gordon opened the door and stepped in. Breez stopped at the next-to-last step, while Bella and Logan hurried on.

"Oh, hi, Gordon," Bella said, acting surprised to see him. "Logan and I are running a little late. I didn't expect to see you." Always the dutiful wife, she hurriedly crossed to him and kissed his cheek.

Gordon glared at Breez. "I don't doubt you're running late when you have your sister over here taking up your valuable time."

"She didn't have me over, I barged in," Breez retorted.

"Why does that not surprise me," Gordon muttered.

"What are you doing home?" Bella asked.

He glared at her. "Do you think to question why I came home to my own house?"

Bella swallowed hard. "Oh, no, I, uh, just thought, you know, you usually eat out on Wednesdays, don't you?"

"It doesn't matter anyway, does it?" Breez said. "Now you two go on, or you'll be late for class."

Bella glanced nervously over at Gordon as Breez practically pushed her and Logan out the door.

The door shut, Breez blew out a breath and turned with a smile. Time to make some more evidence.

Gordon glared at her. "I know I've told you before that you're not welcome in my home."

"I really don't give a rat's behind what you've told me. This isn't just your house. My sister owns half this house and she and my nephew live here and they have the right to see me whenever they want."

Joey threw his pen across his car. He'd kill her, if Gordon didn't do it first. He started the engine of his car.

Gordon advanced on her. "Let me tell you something," he said, and then called her a filthy name. "I'm the one going to work every day and I'm the one paying all the bills."

"Hah! Bella works her butt off playing maid to you and let me remind you it was her money, or my parents' money, who first set you up in business."

Gordon's hand balled into a fist. Breez glanced down at it. "Thinking about hitting me too, Gordy? You'd better think again, because I won't stand by and cry. I'll have you arrested. Now let me give you a little ultimatum. You hurt my sister ever again and I'll make your life hell. I'll come after you with every resource I have and believe me that's considerable. I won't crawl away. You touch my sister again and you'll regret it."

"Bre– eez," Joey moaned. He eased the car toward the driveway.

Gordon came at her, backed her up against the wall. "Very brave words, but you don't know who you're messing with."

Joey flew up the drive.

Breez smiled at him, holding her chin high, wishing he'd hit her. "You may have Bella fooled, Gordy, but not me. Who's coming over? Which bimbo is stupid enough to let you..."

"Why you..." His forearm came up to press against her throat.

"Come on, Gordy. Do it. You know you want to."

Face red with rage, Gordon pressed his arm a little harder, then suddenly stepped back. "You're not worth the effort. Get out."

Breez laughed, moved toward the door. "You're a coward, Gordy. And the jig is up."

She opened the door and stepped out into the fresh air, smiling when she saw Joey quickly backing his car down the driveway.

Joey dialed Jason. "Hey, looks like the tryst is gonna take place here at the house. I'll handle it tonight."

"No, stay with Bella. Caulfield will stay on Landow until you get back to the house."

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"I'm coming, I'm coming," Breez yelled as she ran down the steps, pulling together the edges of the white silk robe she'd pulled on over the pale yellow nightgown. Her head had just hit the pillow when the doorbell rang. Now, whoever it was banged on the door like they would break it down. She looked out the peephole and smiling, opened the door quickly.

"Joey, so glad you stopped by, but it's a little late."

Joey wasn't smiling. He barged in as his hands closed around her upper arms and he gave a small jerk to make her look up at his face. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Her eyes narrowed in anger. "What are you talking about?"

He shook her again. "You know good and well what I'm talking about. I told you from the beginning you were to stay out of the way, you were to back off dealing with Gordon in any way. So what do you do? You go over to his house and egg him on, obviously trying to get him to hurt you."

"I'm not afraid of him," she said casually.

"Well, Breez, you should be. He's twice your size. He could've snapped your neck in a second. He could've crushed your windpipe. He could've done all kinds of things to you. He could've hurt you, Breez."

Breez's mouth formed a pout. "You're the one hurting me."

Joey looked down at his hands where they gripped her arms and released her immediately. He stepped back, drew a deep breath. "Breez, what possessed you to say those things to Gordon?"

She shrugged. "If he'd hit me, we'd have that much more on video. I just can't stand his arrogance and the way Bella cowers when he merely looks in her direction. I guess I felt a little bit braver than usual because I knew you were out there and I knew you wouldn't let anything happen to me, so– I pushed."

Blowing out a breath, Joey shook his head. "What am I supposed to say to that– don't have so much faith in my ability to protect you?"

"I'm sorry, Joey, I know I shouldn't have put you on the spot and got you all worried about me, but please don't be angry. If you could've seen the rage on Gordon's face you'd know it was all worth it."

He backed her up against the wall and put his arm across her throat, imitating the position Gordon had used on her. "I did see, Breez, but this is what I saw. What do you think that made me want to do, huh?" He watched as she bit down on her lip.

She gave her head a slight shake. "I don't know."

He pressed harder, cutting off her air. "It made me want to kill him."

Suddenly his arm let up and he kissed her with an urgency that surprised them both.

"Oh, yes," she whispered as she wrapped her arms around his neck. She closed her eyes, relishing the feel.

She pushed her hands inside the jacket he wore, smoothing them over his chest, reaching around to his back, then stopped suddenly when she encountered his hardware. "What's this?"

He pulled back, his breath labored. "Sorry. I should've taken my gun off before I came barging in here."

"I didn't know you carried a gun."

"I'm an agent. We're all armed." He took a giant step back from her in order to clear his mind. "And now that brings up another subject. What in the world were you thinking giving a gun to Bella? She doesn't even know how to use one. You're playing with fire."

"I'm trying to protect her," she argued.

"She'll end up shooting herself or Logan and I want you to take it back. I mean it."

"No."

"Yes, Breez, there's no arguing the point."

She smiled sexily. "What will you do if I don't?"

"Come on, Breez, I'm not kidding around. A gun is not something you play around with, and a quick, 'this is how you pull the trigger,' is not enough. How would you feel if the gun went off and somehow injured your nephew, huh?"

Frowning, she pushed some curls back from her face.

"Well?"

"I'd feel horrible."

"Then take it back."

"Okay, okay, I'll take it back on one condition."

"What?"

She reached out and stroked her hand slowly over his chest. "You take me upstairs."

He blew out a breath, his eyes roaming over her. "I want to. I even need to. But I can't."

She frowned at him, obviously frustrated. "You are a strong, virile man, Joey. I have faith in you."

Inwardly groaning, he realized he felt as if he were a man dying in the desert and Breez was the water of life. Sighing at his lack of control where Breez was concerned, he leaned down and kissed her, long, slow, deep and gentle, again trying to diminish the feeling of a quick tumble. That's not what he wanted from her. Her words came back to him, the ones she'd spoken to her sister who'd asked if Breez and he were truly an item. Breez had answered with an emphatic "no." Well, he had a newsflash for her. They were much more than an item.

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Logan ran down the stairs with the ease of the eleven-year-old boy he was. "I'll get it," he called to his mother as he headed into the kitchen.

Bella looked up from the pancakes she was in the middle of turning. "Thank you, sweetie, and good morning!"

Logan smiled at her as he lifted the house phone from its cradle. "Backatcha, Mom. Hello?"

"Logan?"

"Yeah."

"This is JoJo. Hope it's not too early to call. My dad said it was."

"Naw, it's okay."

"I tried your cell phone but you didn't answer."

"Uh, yeah, it's in my desk upstairs. I'm not allowed to have it at school so it's usually turned off. Sorry."

"No, that's cool. I just got my phone for my twelfth birthday and I'm not allowed to be on it more than an hour a day. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you before you left for school. Is your dad home?"

"No, he leaves early, usually before I come out of my room. Why?"

"Oh, uh, just wondering. So, me and Eric, we were wondering if maybe you'd like to go with us biking in the canyon this Saturday after class. Uncle Rick and Aunt Bree are taking us and said we could invite a friend and you're the only one we could think of that we really wanted to go with us. If you don't have a bike, we got one you can use."

Before he could give an answer, Logan heard someone talking to JoJo in the background and then JoJo spoke again. "If you don't have a bike, we *have* one you can use," he corrected.

Logan glanced over at his mother who was buttering the pancakes. She smiled at him, mouthed 'who is it' at him. "Hold on," he said to JoJo and placed his hand over the receiver.

"It's JoJo. He and Eric are going biking in the canyons Saturday with Eric's parents and want to know if I can come."

His mother's face lost its color. He knew what she was thinking. His dad would never let him go with the Kinos. He hated them. Logan knew why too. Because his father was jealous. That had to be the only reason, because the Kinos were the best people Logan had ever known.

"It's okay, Mom, it doesn't really matter."

Bella swallowed hard. She could tell Logan really wanted to go. Bless his heart, his entire life consisted of school and chores and working hard to please his father, or rather, to placate him. She remembered what Mark had said to her, "*What do you think this is doing to Logan?*" Gordon had been so hard on her son, and in trying to keep her husband pacified, she'd never questioned him, never suggested he allow Logan to do the things Logan wanted to do.

Back when he was younger Logan had desperately wanted to play Little League baseball, and surprisingly Gordon had allowed it, even attended some practices and games. The coach had bragged on Logan,

about his speed, about his strong arm, about his hitting, but when they'd changed Logan from third base to playing centerfield it had all come to an end. Gordon wouldn't even listen to the coach's reasoning, that they needed someone in the field who was fast, who could catch and who had a strong arm. Gordon had jerked him out of the program and no amount of Logan's begging had made a difference.

Wasn't it time she stood up for her son? What kind of mother would let this go on? So what if she might have to face her angry husband. It's not like that was anything new. It was worth it to see Logan smile and have a little fun. She waved her hand at him. "Of course you can go. Sounds like it will be lots of fun."

Logan gazed at her hopefully. "Are you sure? I mean, maybe you should wait and talk to..."

She raised her chin. "I'm your mother and I say you can go."

Logan wasn't sure what to think. All he knew was he sure wanted to go. But not if it meant his father would be mad at his mom. "But..."

Bella smiled. "Really, Logan," she said softly. "It's okay. I know what you're worried about but I can handle this with your dad. I have an idea, and your father will never even question it."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." She moved forward and ruffled his hair. "Don't keep JoJo waiting."

Smiling, Logan placed the receiver to his ear. "Still there?"

"Yeah," JoJo replied.

"My mom says I can come."

"Totally cool. Okay, well, we'll leave right after class. Uncle Rick says we'll get some lunch and head out."

"Okay."

"I'm totally glad you can come."

"Yeah, me too."

"Hold on," JoJo said, then spoke again. "My dad says to tell your mom 'good morning.'"

Logan smiled. "Uh, Mom, Master Mark says to tell you 'good morning.'"

Bella felt her heart swell and she smiled brightly. "Tell Master Mark I said 'good morning' right back."

"My mom says 'good morning right back.' Well, I guess I'll see ya Saturday."

"Okay, see ya."

Logan hung up. He turned with a smile on his face. "Thanks, Mom, this is gonna be so cool."

She grinned at him as she placed his breakfast on the bar. "You're welcome, baby. I hope you have a wonderful time, but promise me you won't get hurt."

"I promise."

"Fine, now eat or you'll be late for school," Bella said cheerfully. She didn't really have an idea or plan to handle her husband, but she had a few days to come up with one. It didn't really matter. She wanted Logan to enjoy himself for once.

Smiling, she worked on straightening the kitchen, imagining Mark and JoJo eating breakfast together. Mark all dressed in a suit for work, maybe reading a brief, or the news on a laptop. She pictured herself placing a stack of pancakes in front of him. He'd smile up at her. She'd lean down and kiss him. "Good morning," she'd say. "Good morning," he'd say back.

"Mom," Logan said again.

"Hmm?"

"I said bye."

"Oh, bye, sweetheart. Have a good day."

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Breez purred with satisfaction as Joey brushed his lips back and forth over her cheek. Spooning as she watched the early morning light filter through the sheer white curtains of her bedroom was a new experience for her and came close to her imagined version of heaven.

Joey's strong arm wrapped tightly around her waist, pulled her in snug against him. She pressed her back against his muscular chest. She sighed in pleasure.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, his lips close to her ear.

She sighed. "I was thinking that I have never had a man in my room at this time of day."

The words had her opening her eyes with a start, and realizing she'd been dreaming. And wow, what a dream. She sighed as she thought about what it would be like to have Joey Adams as her real boyfriend, as her lover. Maybe she'd say the exact thing she'd just said in her dream, because it was true. She frowned. Oh, he'd love that he was the first to be allowed in her bedroom until morning. His ego

would grow to enormous proportions. She giggled at the thought as she rose and went to shower and dress.

Thirty minutes later, dressed casually, she headed cheerfully down the stairs just as someone knocked on the door. She opened it immediately and he was there.

He frowned at her. “Do you not even look out the peephole to see who’s knocking on your door before you open it?”

“Good morning to you too.”

“Answer my question.”

Her eyes blazed. “I think not. What do you want?”

He had to smile at her temper. He couldn’t very well tell her that he hadn’t been able to get her off his mind and had to come see her first thing this morning or die trying. “Right now, Ms. Sheridan, I want you to consider taking your own safety a little more seriously.”

“Well, currently, the most dangerous thing I‘ve encountered is you.”

“You got that right.”

She laughed, moved back and allowed him entrance.

Once inside he grabbed her hand, pulled her close and kissed her knuckles. “Good morning.”

She gave a soft sigh. “So, to what do I owe this honor?”

He shrugged. “I was a little hard on you last night so I came by to make sure you understood, it was just because I care.”

She nodded with a smile. “I guess I can deal with that. What time do you have to leave?”

“Not before I cook you breakfast.”

“Umm, that sounds delightful. I’m starved.”

They made their way into the kitchen and he started cooking like he’d done it a hundred times. She watched him silently for a time and then asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Not a thing,” he said.

“Well then, why are you frowning?”

“Was I?” His lips pressed together tightly. “I guess it’s because I was thinking about something important.”

“Bella?”

“No. You.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, Breez. I was thinking that I barely know you. That you

barely know me, and yet, here we are, in your home, you there, me cooking breakfast, like we were a couple. I know what it feels like to kiss you, to have you in my arms. We have amazing chemistry that neither one of us can deny, still, as I said the other day, I want more."

She drew a deep breath. "More. As in dinner at a restaurant."

"That's just a means to an end. I want to get to know you."

"And you demand this of all your lovers?"

"No. That's just it, Breez. I don't want you to be my lover. I am not gonna have casual sex with you, although I know, it seems the way I kissed you, it appears otherwise."

"But you've had casual sex with other women, right?"

He sighed. "Not really. Look, I'm not perfect. I don't believe in sex outside of marriage, but I have had a few relationships that came close. In those relationships there were genuine feelings. Still, I came to realize that they weren't keepers."

"Have you never like, um, just used a woman for sex without regard for her feelings?"

"I have not. Have you ever just used a man for sex?"

She frowned. "Yes, actually, I believe I have."

He searched her face and realized she was troubled over this confession. "I love your honesty. And as long as you won't be talking about the future me, I don't think you should worry too much about the guy. Whoever he was, I'm sure he was happy to be used by you."

She frowned. "So, am I just heartless?"

He brushed his knuckles over her cheek. "Oh, you want to come across that way, I get that, but no, Breez, your heart is tender. Maybe you've used sex as a release for the loneliness you feel since your parents' death. Maybe you were searching for something that you can't quite place your finger on."

Moisture gathered in her eyes. "Maybe," she admitted quietly.

"Maybe," he said, leaning closer and kissing her softly on the mouth. "Maybe, it's time you explore those feelings. Maybe you take some time with this man. Get to know him. Let me in, Breez."

"Into what?"

"Into your heart."

"But what if," she stopped, shook her head.

"What if? What if I hurt you? What if I disappoint you? What if you plain ol' don't like me?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"What if I don't like you either? We'll never know unless we take the time. And if for some reason you decide you can't stand me, or I decide we're not right for each other, then I kiss you goodbye and cherish the memory of the time we shared together."

"It's not that simple."

"Isn't it? Sometimes we create drama where there is none. In this moment, this present moment, I am happy to be in your presence, to be close to you." He hugged her. "I'm happy to have my arms around you and to be speaking with you in a heartfelt conversation. Isn't this moment all that matters? I can't live in fear that this moment might not last. I accept that it won't. Wonderful moments like this one with you may continue to happen for fifty years, or may end two days from now. I'll be at peace with the thought that God's plan for me will unfold perfectly. Whatever will be will be and I had this time, this moment to share with you."

She sighed. "I guess that's a good way to look at it. I am definitely enjoying this moment. With you here, by my side, I feel..." She stopped, shook her head. "I don't know— at ease maybe? Relaxed. It's like, you have a calming effect on me and I never would've thought that because at first I didn't even like you."

He grinned. "Yes, you did. You just thought you didn't because the chemistry between the two of us scared you. It kinda scared me too. You felt it immediately and immediately put up a front."

"Again, maybe that's true. What are you, Agent Adams, some sort of psychologist?"

"No, but my work has brought me a lot of understanding of how humans relate to each other. And then there is my stepfather, who *is* a psychologist and offers his wisdom to his family on a regular basis."

Breez drew a deep breath. "So, nutshell, you want to have dinner with me, take me out, see how I act in public?" she said with a grin.

He slowly pulled her against him. "Yes," he murmured.

She felt her heart beat faster and realized she ached for his touch with such intensity that it totally consumed her. How had this happened? How had she become so addicted so quickly to this man, to what he made her feel?

His head lowered, his lips touched hers softly. "Hopefully," he kissed her. "It won't take," he said, kissing her again. "Too much

longer, before I have some time off." His mouth covered hers.

✝✝✝

Hebrews 10:36

"For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise."

Chapter Six

Mark stood just outside the courtroom doors speaking to Justin Lee, the head of the law firm for which he worked. Justin was much more than his boss, though. He'd begun the relationship as Uncle Justin, even though they were not blood related, when Mark was only eight years old. Justin being the best friend of Eric Kino, Mark's stepfather, he'd been a regular in the household for the past twenty-two years.

Mark had immense respect for him as an attorney, as his mentor, as a martial artist and as a friend. Currently, they discussed the cases Mark would be handling before the judge in this morning's court session. Justin was making sure Mark had all his ducks in a row which didn't insult Mark at all.

Mark looked down, his black shoe kicking softly at a scuff on the shiny tile floor of the courthouse as he listened to Justin's advice.

"And, if you let Judge Mayfield know today that both the mother and sister of the girl will testify against her, it's possible the case could be thrown out," Justin said.

Mark nodded. "That's what I'm reaching for."

"Good. Now, did the reports come in on the Bailey case?"

Mark shook his head and sighed heavily. "No. I'm gonna have to ask for a continuance."

Justin frowned. "Judge Mayfield won't like it."

"It can't be helped. I'm waiting on the medical report from Dr. Kadowski. He's world-renowned in his field and his report will go a long way to exonerate Miss Bailey. She did not abuse that child."

Justin nodded. "A little emotionally involved in this one?"

Mark shrugged. "How can I not be? She's so young and scared. The state feels bad for the little boy and wants someone to blame. I feel bad for him too, but not at the expense of a twenty-year-old girl's entire life."

"Stand back a little, Mark. Get too involved and you don't think

as clearly. I like your passion, but I want you to be at your best. It's the only way you can really be of service to Miss Bailey and everyone else in the future that you represent."

Mark nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll work on that," he said just as he heard a loud burst of laughter. He looked up to see Gordon Landow making his way down the corridor, a group of his cronies hanging on his every word.

Gordon Landow was a prominent defense attorney. He regularly broke bread with several judges and with a few in the D.A.'s office. Not that *that* was any big deal. Justin did the same. However, Gordon's cockiness annoyed Mark. Add in the fact that every time Mark looked at the man he wanted to put a fist in his big mouth, and one might say that dealing with Gordon was not a favorite part of Mark's day.

Usually, Mark hardly ever ran into the man, since Gordon was a big wheeler-dealer who usually worked the state court and Mark was a lowly grunt who thus far had worked only county court. This morning, however, it looked like Gordon would be working the same court. Mark had to admit he was curious to see just how good the guy was. Today would only be preliminary hearings, still, Mark would have a chance to see Gordon in action. Know your enemy, his stepfather always said. He intended to do just that.

"Justin Lee," Gordon said loudly as they approached the courtroom double doors. He extended his hand.

Justin shook his hand, nodded politely. "Gordon."

"Nice to see the competition," Gordon joked.

The several attorneys with him chuckled politely.

"Nonsense," Justin said, his voice overly friendly. "There's no competition at all."

Mark smiled slightly as he watched Gordon's eyes flicker with controlled anger.

Gordon looked at Mark then, as if he hadn't noticed him standing there. He nodded. "Mark."

"Gordon," Mark answered.

"Justin gonna let you teethe on a few cases today?"

"Only a few," Mark answered.

"Well, I suppose you gotta get in there sometime and start earning your keep, right?"

"Absolutely," Mark said again, doing his best to not let the little

gibes get to him.

"Court's about to start," Justin said as he opened the door for everyone to go in ahead of him.

Mark and the other attorneys filed in.

Gordon motioned for Justin to go ahead. "I'll be right there," he said. "Gotta take a leak." He hurried away.

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Joey wandered up the large staircase since Breez insisted on doing the breakfast dishes. He couldn't help it. He was curious about the amazing woman who seemed to occupy his mind. Wandering into what he thought must be her bedroom, he examined his surroundings.

The bed linens were white, the bed was white, the dresser was white, the curtains were white and the walls were white. Well, maybe the walls were off-white, but essentially white. It would've seemed quite sterile, except there were bold splashes of color everywhere. The throw pillows on the bed were a vibrant red and yellow. The small chair on the other side of the bed was a brilliant blue with huge red polka dots. Along the top of the white dresser were eight bright blue bottles. But the most astounding splash of color was the painting above the bed.

A brown earth path meandered along a thicket of trees and underbrush on one side. Along the other edge of the path was a steep drop-off, and farther down, a rushing creek, bubbling over rocks and dropping down into a deeper pool. Wildflowers in brilliant yellows, blues and pinks popped up here and there among all the briars and undergrowth which was done in great detail. A bee floated in the air, a bird sang from a branch of one of the trees. The painting was remarkable and Joey felt as if he were in this place, walking along that very path.

He moved closer, examining the strokes of the paintbrush, feeling the movement of the painter. He knew before he made out the signature who had painted it.

"What are you doing?" Breez asked, hands on hips.

Joey looked back at her. "Wow, Breez, this is magnificent."

She blinked a few times, but couldn't stop her eyes from filling with tears. "Thank you, Joey."

He sat down on the edge of the bed. "When you spoke of painting it sounded like it was just a hobby. I made light of it. I'm sorry. I had

no idea you were this good, I mean, good grief, Breez, this is incredible. You should be showing your work at a gallery. You should be selling paintings for thousands."

"Hardly."

"I don't know that much about art, but I know I haven't seen a piece that moves me as much as this one right here."

She giggled. "That's probably because you wanna get in good with the artist."

He frowned. "That has nothing to do with it."

"I was just kidding. Really, thank you, Joey. It feels good to have someone appreciate my art."

"It will be more than just someone if I have my way about it."

"What do you mean?"

"Breez, you really don't know how good this is? Sweetheart, you need an agent. If you'll let me, I'd like to look into it for you."

She shrugged. "I think you'll find a great lack of interest."

"Wanna bet?"

She rolled her eyes.

He smiled at her. "We'll just see." He glanced at his watch. "But right now, I have to leave."

"I understand."

"We'll talk soon." He gently kissed her and left the room.

Breez watched him trot down the stairs and out the front door, realizing she suddenly felt lonely.

Outside, Joey took a moment to breathe in the crisp and somewhat cooler late September air, to appreciate the smell of flowers and grass and sunshine. He felt relaxed, and in tune with the world. It made him smile. He'd come to see Breez before he'd completed his usual morning routine, so he intended to head home and get in his workout. He answered his phone as he skipped down the large curved steps of the Sheridans' front landing. All his happy feelings lasted the split second it took him to glance at the phone before he pressed it to his ear.

"Jeff, everything okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Jeff Davis asked.

"I'm figuring you called to report in after your watch at the Landow house last night, and if everything was status quo, you would simply document the night and brief Agent Carter as he arrived."

"Well then, how very astute of you, Joey boy. Guess that's why

I call you boss."

"You have never called me 'boss' and I doubt you ever will, even when that day comes," Joey stated, wondering if there was any hidden resentment there. Joey was slated to take over Ameritech because he was like family to Jason Lee. Jeff, seven years Joey's senior, had been an agent much longer than Joey. Jeff was one of Jason's right-hand men, along with Keegan Tanner who ran the southeast division of Ameritech, and Alphonse Guzman who ran the international side. Joey had immense respect for all three men.

"So, what's up? Why did you call? Something happen?" Joey asked as he slid into the car and started the engine.

"No, but something could. Just wanted you to be aware. Ms. Landow gave Logan permission to go biking this Saturday with Ricky and Bree and the boys without consulting her husband. The boy was concerned about it, but she told him she had an idea on how to handle Landow if he disapproves of the outing."

"Okay, so, what's the idea?" Joey asked.

"She never said, but I don't buy it."

"You think she was lying to ease Logan's concerns?"

"That's exactly how I see it," Jeff said.

"Well, Jeff, how you see it is always good for me."

Jeff nodded. "I appreciate that vote of confidence."

"So," Joey went on. "When Landow finds out his son is out with the evil Kino family, he may pop his cork," Joey surmised aloud as he pulled out of the Sheridan drive, mentally pushing the oasis out of his mind and focusing in on his day. "You filled Carter in on this?"

"Yes, and I'm a little worried. It's been several days since he's laid hands on her. In your initial report, you state the violence happens several times a week."

Joey nodded. "So, it's past time. The pressure is building. He needs an excuse to let go."

"Hey, if all he needs is a little violence for a release, I wouldn't mind picking a fight with him at a bar or something."

Joey gave a soft laugh. "Not that I don't appreciate the heartfelt offer, Jeff, but first, he'd have you arrested. Second, this guy doesn't frequent bars, he's more the country club type. Third, I can't have you accidentally killing the guy because I want really bad to see him stand trial for aggravated assault."

Jeff laughed. "Accidentally killing him? I think you have me confused with Keegan."

Joey chuckled. "Keegan would tell you that he doesn't accidentally kill anybody. When he kills, he does it on purpose."

Jeff laughed. "Yeah, that's exactly what Keegan would say."

"Anyway, thanks for the heads up, Jeff. And I didn't say it before, but thanks for taking the night shift. I know it's hard on a marriage."

"Yeah, Mick's not in love with the idea of me being gone at night, but she understands my job. Besides she's got two heathen boys to keep her occupied."

Joey thought about Jeff's pride and joy. The three and four-year-old boys were definitely a handful. "Thanks again, Jeff. Get some sleep."

"Will do."

The moment Joey ended the call his phone rang again. "Good morning, Jason."

"Morning. I have a lot going on this morning, Joey, so I'm gonna keep this short and sweet. First, I've been over yesterday's reports. I want that gun out of the house. I'm assuming you've already had a word with Ms. Sheridan about that."

"Yes, sir."

"Second, Agent Davis has filled you in about his concerns?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Third and last. Have you read Agent Caulfield's report from last night?"

"Uh, no, sir," Joey admitted. "I, uh, went straight to see Breez about the gun and about her deliberately baiting Gordon. The rest of the time was spent, uh..."

Jason blew out a breath. "I get it." He sighed. "Read the report. Nutshell, after *our client*," Jason said with emphasis, "left the Landow house yesterday and you tailed Ms. Landow, Caulfield was able to document the arrival of one Miss Katherine Knotts, a very rich, young, socially prominent woman who is a member of Gordon's country club. Lucky for us, Gordon performed with her on the leather chaise in the front room before he took her upstairs to the bedroom, so we have video. And since Mrs. Bella Landow knew about the cameras in her home before she left and did not insist on their removal, we can count that as permission from the homeowner."

"And therefore, we have proof of adultery with video that could possibly be admitted in court as evidence," Joey said.

"Depending on the judge. Justin says if we get Mayfield, we're definitely in business because he doesn't think the man can be bought. However, if we get Curtis we're in trouble, but we may get by if there is enough publicity. Curtis may be in bed with Landow, but he will not want to go down with a sinking ship."

"So we need to speak with Bella and let her know we have the evidence we need to remove her and Logan from the home with no chance of Gordon being able to take Logan away from her."

"That part is not necessarily true," Jason replied. "We have some evidence of his abuse and some of his infidelity. She could win a divorce settlement. Not necessarily a child custody hearing. We'll stay on it a few more days I think. Maybe a week. I don't want him to slip through the greasy cracks. I want more documentation of the affair so he can't say it was a one-nighter. More documentation of his tendency toward violence now that Ms. Landow knows the cameras are in place, so that it will possibly be admissible. That's it for now."

"So, Jason, you said there's a lot going on this morning? Anything I can help with?"

"Only if you can be in two places at once. Agent Hawk was working security for Tessa Nichols after she had a couple of threatening letters from some guy who said he was gonna blow her away at her next concert. She was playing to the country crowd at Cheyenne's big fall fair and the guy tried for her last night. Nate was hit."

Joey cursed softly. Agent Nathaniel Hawk was one of Joey's favorite people.

"He'll live, but it was a close call. Jack took out the shooter."

"I'll give Nate a call, and his wife too," Joey said.

"Good. I'm gonna fly up to meet with him, make sure the family is taken care of. On the east coast, it seems Keegan is taking on the world again. He turned down working security for a Miami banker because Keegan believed him to be dirty. The guy took it personally and sent some men to harass him and his family."

Joey's face darkened because you don't mess with an agent's family. "I don't imagine Keegan and Lizzy took it too well with someone threatening their family, especially their kids."

"Yeah, not too well. Neither did John and Jodi Appel, nor Chaz and Lisa Stewart. So, Keegan took it upon himself to investigate the banker's dealings, and found a boatload. Enough to turn over to our friends at the Bureau. Last night a giant bust went down, big shootout. Ten of our agents were involved."

"Wow, sorry I missed that."

"I'm sorry too. Would've been a good learning experience for you to be involved in a bust that size. Nevertheless, I need you where you are and I'll make it up to you."

"I'll count on that. Anyone hurt in Miami?"

"Two Feds, none of ours. The banker, two big-time drug lords and scores of minions arrested. However, four perps ended up dead at the wrong end of Ameritech guns."

"Any of those Keegan's?"

"Good guess."

Joey chuckled. "Hmm, maybe I should've asked if any of those were not Keegan's."

"Yes. But my time to chat is over. Read reports. You'll have the details. Better get Ms. Sheridan out of your system or put her on hold Joseph, because if I have to fly east you'll be called on to man my desk. Be ready."

"Absolutely," Joey said. He ended the call as he pulled into the parking garage of his apartment. Wasting no time, he ran inside, changed clothes, turned on the computer and the giant high-def screen on the wall, jumped on the treadmill and began briefing himself on the details of Agent Keegan Tanner's latest bust.

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Mark listened as Judge Mayfield addressed the court. He was a no-nonsense kind of guy. The glitz and glamour of Hollywood and big money didn't impress him. He frowned upon cliques. He expected both the District Attorney's office and the defense attorneys to do their job correctly. Mark believed Judge Mayfield made sound and logical rulings even though a few of those rulings had been made against Mark's cases. All in all, he seemed to be a good man. Mark hoped putting his cases before Judge Mayfield today wouldn't change his opinion of him.

The judge stopped speaking abruptly as the doors to the court squeaked open. The judge frowned. Mark turned to see Gordon

Landow enter the courtroom with an arrogant smile on his face. The man nodded his head at the judge and then at a few others in the room as he made his way up the aisle. Mark could only shake his head as Gordon actually stopped to clasp hands with a few attorney friends who were seated with their clients in the benches. Gordon smiled, whispered to them and finally arrived at the front pew where several men shifted over to allow him to sit.

"As I was saying," Judge Mayfield continued, "I will not put up with any showboating nor any shenanigans. For the benefit of those whose cases will be brought forward today, this is a preliminary hearing only, unless you intend to plead guilty. If that is the case, we will take care of it when your case is called."

The judge glanced in Gordon's direction. "For those of you who may not be used to county court, or to my court– I do not tolerate being late. Keep that in mind for the future."

Mark eyed Gordon. He was pleased to see the judge's remarks wiped the arrogant smile off his face.

The court clerk began to call cases. As each one was called, the attorneys representing each defendant moved forward to the podium and would be joined by one of the assistant DAs.

While the judge accepted guilty pleas and reset court dates for trial, Mark once again glanced over his notes, making sure he hadn't overlooked anything.

"County versus Marinda Bailey," the clerk finally announced.

Mark glanced at his client, noting the worried yet hopeful expression in her large brown eyes. Every time he'd seen her she'd been a wreck. Today, she'd smoothed her hair back into a small bun at the nape of her neck, donned a modest skirt and jacket whose deep golden color complemented her coffee-colored skin. She wore some makeup today and Mark thought she looked quite beautiful. And young. Young and frightened. He gave her a reassuring smile then made his way to the podium as Judge Mayfield thumbed carefully through the case on the desk in front of him.

Judge Mayfield finally looked up. "The charges are felony assault, cruelty to children and child endangerment."

"Yes, sir," Mark answered.

The judge nodded. "Is the DA ready to go to trial with this case?"

"Yes, sir, we believe we are," the assistant answered, her voice

firm and somewhat haughty, as if she herself were somehow personally offended by the case.

"You believe, Ms. Brown? Are you or are you not ready?"

"Yes, sir, we are," she corrected.

The judge glanced at Mark. "Are you ready, Mr...."

"Adams," Mark supplied. "No, Your Honor, we are awaiting the expert reports from two specialists in the field."

"The field of?"

"SBS, sir. Shaken Baby Syndrome."

The murmur from the courtroom distracted Mark for a second. He hated saying those words in public. Immediately a picture is drawn of his client in a state of frenzied rage, shaking her one-year-old little boy until he was senseless. The judge went on as if he hadn't noticed the sound.

"What are these specialists' titles and credentials?"

"Dr. Kadowski is a world-renowned neurosurgeon who specializes in children's injuries to the brain. Dr. Hines is chief of surgery at St. Loves Children's Hospital in Boston. His report will second Dr. Kadowski's findings."

"How long before these reports are ready?"

"I spoke with Dr. Kadowski this morning. He promises the report in two weeks. Dr. Hines emailed me Friday stating his report will arrive by the end of this week."

The judge nodded.

"Excuse me, Your Honor," the assistant interrupted. "This case has been on the books for almost six months now. We believe they have had long enough to have gathered the reports they say they have coming."

The judge frowned. "You are suggesting they are purposely delaying this case coming to trial? And they would like to do this because...?"

"Well, of course, to prolong the perpetrator's freedom."

"The alleged perpetrator. The defendant, Ms. Brown."

"The defendant," she repeated.

Judge Mayfield turned to Mark. "Is this true?"

Mark swallowed, drew a calming breath. "Ms. Bailey, the defendant," Mark said pointedly, "would like nothing better than to have this all over with because each delay is another month she doesn't

get to see her child."

"With good reason," Ms. Brown mumbled, just loud enough for all to hear.

The court murmured their agreement.

Judge Mayfield looked up quickly. "Another outburst, even the slightest and I'll have you for contempt of court." He raised his brows at Mark. "Anything else, Mr. Adams?"

"Judging merely from the reaction of this courtroom, it's obvious that most people are all too willing to immediately believe the worst in a case involving an innocent child. I believe Ms. Bailey is innocent until proven guilty. There is no other evidence, no witnesses to the alleged incident. There is no sign of abuse. No bruises. A full body scan was performed and showed nothing. Had Ms. Bailey shaken her child hard enough to cause seizures there would have been bruises, thumb prints or fingerprints where she held the child. There is nothing. There is only the doctor, who is not even a specialist, who only believes the child was *probably* shaken and that shaking the child *probably* caused the hematomas which caused the seizures. I hate to think we will send someone to prison based on 'probably.' On the other side, there are specialists who believe the hematomas and seizures were caused by something else. So, since this will be a trial of the experts, I think it only fitting that we wait to have the reports *from the experts*.

"I apologize for their delay. Both doctors have extremely busy schedules and were gracious enough to take a look at the child's medical records. That took up the first six weeks. After looking over the medical records and realizing a grave mistake was about to be made, Dr. Hines was able to rearrange his schedule and fly in to examine Ms. Bailey's little boy, run tests and come to his conclusions. That took the next four weeks. I had to wait a little longer for Dr. Kadowski who was out of the country speaking to the European Council of Doctors on the most recent breakthroughs in brain trauma. I stayed in constant touch with him and he was able to make it here to see the child just this last week."

"You couldn't have gotten the opinion of a doctor more accessible?"

"Yes, sir, I could have. But, there were two things making me wait on Dr. Kadowski."

"And those were?"

"I believed Ms. Bailey to be innocent and thought her life to be important enough to warrant the best."

"And?"

"And," he paused, hoping he wasn't making a mistake. "And this being one of my first big cases, I wanted to make sure I win."

He stood straight-faced while the rest of the courtroom chuckled.

The judge did his best to suppress his smile. Finally he nodded. "I thank you for your honesty, Mr. Adams. I'll reschedule the court date for Monday, November 1st."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

"Well done," Judge Mayfield said. He looked at the clerk. "Call the next case."

Back in his seat, Justin shook Mark's hand. "Well done indeed," Justin whispered.

"Thanks. Feel like I need to go throw up now."

Justin smiled.

As the next case was being heard, Mark leaned over to whisper in Marinda's ear. "Okay, we're set for November 1st."

"Thank you, Mr. Adams," she said as a tear escaped.

He patted her hand. "It's not over yet."

"I understand, though, I have a feeling it will all work out."

"Keep that thought," he said. He looked past her, smiled and nodded at the girl's grandmother. The woman nodded back.

Mark watched as the two women quietly slipped from the courtroom. His attention was drawn by Gordon Landow's voice.

"That one's mine." He made a show of gathering his papers, walking to the podium, opening his leather-bound legal pad.

"The charge is child pornography," the judge stated.

"Yes it is," Gordon answered smugly. "Though it will be proven to be ridiculous."

A murmur from the crowd. The judge looked up quickly, frowned, and the court became quiet.

"That will remain to be seen at the time of trial. Ms. Brown is the DA's office ready to go to trial on this?"

"Yes, sir, we are."

"Mr. Landow?" the judge asked.

Pleased that the judge knew his name though they'd never been introduced, Gordon smiled broadly. "Actually, Your Honor, I'm gonna

need to reset the court date."

"Why is that?"

Gordon flipped quickly through his pages. "One moment," he said, turning several more pages, scanning each one briefly. "Ahh, yes, that would be because Mr. Kinder is not available for trial."

"Well, I assure you we're terribly sorry to inconvenience Mr. Kinder, but unless he has a very good excuse to..."

"He does," Gordon said quickly, interrupting the judge.

Judge Mayfield's face darkened. "Mr. Landow, let me warn you now, that I don't like to be interrupted."

"Yes, of course, Your Honor. I meant no offense," Gordon mumbled.

"What is Mr. Kinder's problem?"

"My client has suffered a stroke and is incapable of standing trial. He is recovering in a facility in Bakersfield. At this time he is unable to walk or speak."

The judge took a few moments to make notes, nodded, looked up. "Ms. Brown, what are the particulars of this case?"

The assistant flipped through her papers. "Your Honor, Mr. Kinder was arrested when he attempted to contact a child pornography website that was under surveillance by a county task force."

While the woman continued giving details, Gordon quickly shuffled through his own papers. He remembered the case, just barely. He'd assigned it to one of his underlings who, two days ago, had the audacity to tell Gordon he was leaving the firm, hence Gordon's appearance at county court today. Gordon had done his best to make sure the attorney had not taken any clients with him. He smiled as he remembered the man's words. "What are you gonna do, Gordon? Work them yourself? I have nine cases pending right now. You gonna work them all?"

"With ease," Gordon had answered smugly. And then, he'd had security escort the gentleman out of the building.

"Mr. Landow? Mr. Kinder still pleads not guilty?"

Gordon brought himself back to the present, held up a finger. "One moment, Your Honor." He took a few seconds to read over the case.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Kinder's plea remains."

"Fill me in on his defense, please."

"One more moment," Gordon said, again holding up his finger.

This time he took at least a full minute to read over the case. Mark could only shake his head. This was the great Gordon Landow in action? Granted, he was used to being shown deference in state court, but was he so full of himself that he couldn't understand the protocol most judges insist upon in their courtrooms? Finally, Gordon looked up, ready to proceed with his answer.

"Your Honor, after thirty years of marriage, Mr. Kinder and his wife divorced about a year ago. Six months of trying to deal with his emotional pain and loneliness, Mr. Kinder sought solace in visiting some of the porn sites– adult porn sites that is. Not that you or I approve of such behavior, we can certainly understand that the man was simply attempting to fill a void in his life and I don't need to remind you that adult porn is perfectly legal."

"No, you don't need to remind me," the judge said, his voice on the border of sarcasm and a warning in his tone.

Gordon looked up, realized his mistake and went on. "He admits to being curious as he's never watched porn before this time. You may be aware that once one visits, and especially once one subscribes to a porn site, one is inundated with advertising and spam offering looks at more sites. Mr. Kinder merely clicked on one of those sites and when he saw children involved he immediately wrote an email to the webmaster for the site and instructed them to never contact him again. He then sent an email to his local police department, informing them of the site and how he came across the site."

"And did the local police contact him or investigate the complaint?"

"I'm not sure. As far as I know, they never had a chance before the CBI moved in. You can imagine the surprise when Mr. Kinder opened his door to admit the CBI and they promptly placed him under arrest. Of course, he immediately contacted my firm."

"Do you have copies of the emails Mr. Kinder sent to the porn site and to the police department?"

He thumbed through some papers. "It doesn't appear I have them with me today, but I'm sure I can get them."

"Do you have the medical paperwork required to continue this case that shows Mr. Kinder is indeed a stroke patient?"

"Ahh, the paperwork is forthcoming."

"Forthcoming," Judge Mayfield said slowly.

"Yes, I uh, apparently, the paperwork has been requested by my office but has not been returned."

"How long ago was it requested?"

"I'm, uh, not sure."

The judge let out a heavy sigh. "Mr. Landow, it is obvious to me and most likely, to those in this courtroom, that you are ill prepared to handle this case today."

"I am handling the case for another attorney in my office who is otherwise engaged."

"For whatever reason, Mr. Landow. I'm sure your client has paid you dearly for your services. I'm sure he doesn't care what the reason is, his life is very much in your hands. Do you realize that Mr. Landow? Do you realize that Mr. Kinder faces jail time depending on how you handle his case? From what you tell me today, this case could be over and done with, had you been prepared to document your statements today. I could have thrown this case out had you been properly prepared. Now, sir, I have no idea why your request for the medical paperwork has not been returned. I think it is of major importance, don't you? I suggest that you take this weekend to drive to the facility in Bakersfield personally and retrieve the necessary paperwork. I want that paperwork on my desk first thing Monday morning."

"But I had plans..."

"I will not have attorneys in my court playing havoc with the lives of the people they are supposed to represent. So, I suggest you change whatever plans you had for the weekend and take care of this client. First thing Monday morning, Mr. Landow, is that clear?"

Mark tried not to gloat as he watched Gordon's face turn red with either anger or embarrassment.

"Clear enough," Gordon muttered.

"Thank you." The judge turned and nodded at the clerk. "Call the next case please."

Mark watched as Gordon moved back to his seat. The man turned as he sat, to glare at Mark. Mark kept his expression completely blank. Even though he felt somewhat victorious, he had no wish to raise Gordon's ire, because he knew who would receive the brunt of that.

While the judge took care of a guilty plea and two more continuances, Mark moved to sit next to the other client he would

represent today, an eighteen-year-old boy. Jamie Youngman, accused of rape, was a college freshman with both an academic scholarship and a football scholarship to USC that would all go down the drain if Mark wasn't able to help him. They specifically came to him to hire him as their attorney because they knew Mark, being a former Heisman candidate, would understand just what Jamie stood to lose. Mark shook his hand and nodded to the young man's mother and father who accompanied him. "Keep your fingers crossed on this today."

Jamie nodded, the hope in his eyes mirrored by his parents. When the case was called, Mark drew a calming breath, said a quick prayer, stood and went to the podium.

Judge Mayfield finished reading his notes and looked up. "The charge is rape along with a lesser charge of unlawful sexual intercourse due to the victim being a child." He looked toward the DA. "Mr. Hodges, are you ready to proceed with this case?"

"We are, Your Honor."

"Mr. Adams?" Judge Mayfield asked.

"We too are ready to proceed if needs be, Your Honor, however, I would like to suggest that the case be thrown out before we waste the court's time."

"I assume you have some new information?"

"Yes, sir. I've recently been contacted by both the mother and the sister of the young lady who accused my client of rape. The one you call a child is seventeen years of age. She and Mr. Youngman have been boyfriend and girlfriend for four months."

"I know the facts of the case, Mr. Adams. Please move along."

Mark cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. The mother and sister of the alleged victim have stepped forward with testimony that the victim was angry with Mr. Youngman for not proposing marriage to her before he left for college. She was angry that she was still in high school and he'd moved on. They will testify that she contrived the entire thing to get back at Mr. Youngman."

Judge Mayfield nodded. "And do you have any written statements to this effect?"

"Yes, sir," Mark stated firmly as he held up the documents. "I have two affidavits, one from each of them."

"Bring them to me."

Mark approached and handed the papers to the judge and went

back to his place. He kept his eyes forward as the judge read.

The judge looked up. “This is all well and good, but not good enough on its own. Who knows what agenda the mother and sister of this girl may have. We must take every claim of rape seriously. We must empower women with a voice or we will set them back fifty years.”

Mark nodded. “Understood, Your Honor. Will the victim’s own written words be enough?”

“Her own words?”

“Yes, sir. To go along with the affidavits, the mother found her daughter’s diary, which specifically spells out her entire plan to ruin this innocent young man.”

“Do you have that diary?”

“I do, Your Honor,” Mark said solemnly. He reached into his briefcase and pulled the small book out for all to see.

“Your Honor,” the DA said loudly. “Our office has been given no notice of this new evidence.”

Mark held up a small green card. “Actually, Your Honor, I have a signed return receipt showing the DA’s office received this information two weeks ago. I have also placed numerous calls to Mr. Hodges and have yet to have my calls returned.”

Judge Mayfield nodded and then motioned for Mark to bring him the diary.

“I’ve used highlighter to place brackets around the more important statements,” Mark explained. “The loose pages there are schoolwork done by the alleged victim with her name on it to verify that the handwriting is the same. If needed, I have a handwriting expert ready to testify that the writing is indeed that of the alleged victim.”

Mark waited while the judge thumbed through the diary and examined the other evidence. He knew it could go either way.

Finally Judge Mayfield looked up. “I don’t know why your office is having trouble communicating, Mr. Hodges. Would you like to examine the affidavits and the diary? I must say, as far as I’m concerned everything is in order.”

“No, sir, that won’t be necessary. In light of the new evidence we withdraw the case against Mr. Youngman.”

“Case dismissed,” Judge Mayfield said firmly.

There were a few gasps in the courtroom that Mark knew came

from Jamie and his parents. He couldn't hold back his smile. He gathered his papers, shoved them in his briefcase and turned to head back to his seat.

"Mr. Adams?"

Mark turned back to the judge, his heart pounding. "Yes, sir?"

The judge actually smiled. "Again, well done."

"Thank you, sir."

The judge then gestured toward Gordon Landow. "All of you who have forgotten the importance of your job, I offer Mr. Adams as a shining example of what you should strive to be. Efficient, professional, prepared and passionate. Fine qualities indeed."

"Thank you, Your Honor," Mark said again as he left the podium.

He didn't stop to sit. He motioned for the Youngman family to follow him out of court. The moment they stepped through the heavy double doors both Jamie and his mother threw their arms around Mark.

"Thank you. Thank you so much, Mr. Adams," Mrs. Youngman said as she sobbed.

"My pleasure," Mark said. "But really, it wasn't me. I mean, if Mrs. Anders and her younger daughter hadn't come to me, we probably would have had to go to trial."

"But we didn't, and you did a fine job," Mr. Youngman offered. "We will be forever grateful."

Mark smiled and held out his hand to Jamie. "Take care, Jamie. And well, not meaning to preach, but remember, if we reserve sexual relations for marriage, things like this wouldn't happen. I'm not a minister, but I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to help you see the wisdom of this. And it's not a holier-than-thou type thing, because as I already told you, I too, made mistakes. Now, it's a fresh start, so, work hard in school."

"I will. I hope you'll come see some of my games."

"I'd be honored."

Mark watched the much relieved family head toward the courthouse doors. He looked upward, smiled, nodded and whispered, "Thank you, Jesus." Then quickly, he pulled out his cell and called his brother.

"Whazzup?" Joey asked, his good mood still evident.

"I just finished up a court session with Gordon Landow and I want you to be aware of two things. First, he bombed out in court and was

reprimanded by the judge who then held me up as an example to him."

Joey frowned. "Hmm, so he'll be in a piss poor mood when he gets home tonight, which means I need to be on my toes."

"Correct. Second, he's been ordered by the judge to drive to Bakersfield this weekend to get some paperwork from a medical facility, so the agent you have tailing him needs to be prepared to go on a trip."

"Gotcha. Anything else?"

"Not for now."

"So, congratulations."

"For what?"

"For doing such a fine job that you would be held up as an example. It must've been some kinda great job you did," Joey said.

"I covered all my bases. Too bad that doing what's expected of you is considered an outstanding job."

"Whatever, bro. I know you go above and beyond. Just accept the congrats gracefully."

Mark chuckled. "Okay, thanks little brother. I gotta go. Take care of Bella and Logan."

"Will do."

~~**~~

"But why Bakersfield of all places?" Katherine Knotts complained into the phone.

Gordon thought of the blonde beauty and how she was probably sprawled across a chaise lounge by the pool at the country club. She was young, and clever and every man at the club wanted her desperately, yet, he was the one who had her. She was his and she made everything in his boring life bearable, especially living with the sniveling little piece of nothing that was his wife. "Because I have to pick up some paperwork there. I have to cover for the pile of crap Les left behind."

"But what could we possibly do in Bakersfield?" Katherine whined.

"We'll stay at the Crystal Palace and the Moscow ballet is performing at the Fox and I've arranged for a full treatment at the spa."

"Oh, Gordy, you do know how to treat a girl, don't you?"

"Oh, I truly do, Katherine."

"Too bad for your wife that she doesn't appreciate what a good

man she has."

"Too bad indeed, but I'm lucky to have you."

"Yes you are and don't you forget it. So what time shall I be ready?"

"Friday noon. I can't wait to get you alone."

"Me neither, my darling."

~~**~~

Bella tasted the sauce, nodded her head and placed the wooden spoon neatly in the spoon rest designed to keep the countertop clean. She went to the oven and opened the door, peeked in at the pie, making sure the crust was not getting overly browned.

She'd been racking her brain all day, trying to come up with something Gordon would accept as the reason for allowing Logan to spend the day biking with the Kinos on Saturday. Nothing had come to mind. She admitted to herself she was afraid of his reaction, afraid enough that she almost wished she hadn't given Logan permission. No. Her son deserved to be able to go out with friends and do normal things, to have some fun. She was so happy that Logan was finally making a few friends. He always seemed like such a loner. The only time he ever seemed to act like a normal kid was at their martial arts class. Especially on Saturdays when Master Mark was teaching.

Master Mark, Bella sighed as she thought of him. He was so kind to her and Logan. He was concerned for them. He was concerned for her. *I care for you, Bella*, he'd said. And he'd kissed her. And she was so bad, because she wanted him to do it again. And again. Her eyes closed, her lips parted as she imagined him moving close to her, placing his hands on her, drawing her close and placing his lips on hers. Sighing, she touched her lips with her finger.

"What are you doing?"

Gasping, she jumped back and hit the pot of spaghetti sauce, sloshing the sauce over the counter and onto the floor. "I, I was just thinking. I didn't hear you come in."

He scowled. "You were standing in the middle of the kitchen with your eyes closed."

"Uh, sometimes, it helps me to think clearly. You know, like it blocks out all the other distractions."

Gordon shook his head. "You're pathetic, Bella. Now look at the mess you've made."

She reached for a towel. “I’ll get it cleaned.”

He rolled his eyes at her. “Yes, you will. And you’ll clean the rest of this filthy house while you’re at it. I’m going away for the weekend. I have some business I have to take care of for one of my clients. I’m leaving tomorrow, so pack me a bag to take with me when I leave for work in the morning. I don’t want to have to come back to the house.”

Bella nodded, her eyes wide and she was very, very careful to not show any pleasure in what he was saying. However, inside she was jumping with joy. She couldn’t believe her luck. He’s going away. He will never know that Logan is gone! She sobered enough to speak. “When will you be returning?”

“Keeping tabs on me, Bella?”

“No, of course not. I just wanted to know how many changes of clothing you might need me to pack for you.”

“I’ll be gone Friday and Saturday and will be back late Sunday afternoon or early evening. And pack my swimsuit and my tux. And do your best, Bella, to keep it from getting creased.”

Bella nodded.

“Now, while I’m gone, I want you to clean this house. Look at this floor. You know how I feel about dirty floors.”

Bella looked around her, trying hard to see where it was dirty.

“When I get back I’m gonna pull out the stove and refrigerator, Bella, and I’d better not find one speck of dirt, one greasy spot, not even one crumb.”

He reached up to open a cabinet just above her head. She flinched. He glowered. “And I want you to clean and organize every single cabinet and the pantry too. And while you’re at it, the entire back half of the garage is a pigpen. I want all those boxes labeled and organized and the floor thoroughly scrubbed.”

He reached forward, grabbed a lock of her hair that had fallen from the ponytail, enjoying the frightened look that came into her eyes. “That should keep you busy enough so that you won’t miss me while I’m gone, huh Bella?”

She nodded quickly.

He looked deep into her eyes, decided he wanted nothing from her tonight. “Where’s my son?”

“He’s upstairs doing his homework.”

“Good. Now, hurry and finish dinner. I’m starved.”

~~**~~

"Hi, Joey," Breez purred into the phone. The moment she'd seen it was him she'd put down the paintbrush and slipped down into the armchair, the only piece of furniture in the upstairs room she'd turned into an art studio.

"Hello, gorgeous."

"I'm guessing from the tone of your voice that everything is okay with Bella at the moment."

"Well, okay in that he's not beating her at the moment, yes. Also okay in that he won't be around her for three days, because he's going out of town on a business trip."

"Now that *is* good news."

"More good news is he nailed one Katherine Knotts in the living room clearly on camera for all the world to see and is taking the same woman with him on his trip. So, more footage will be forthcoming."

"Katherine? I should've known. I must say they've played it pretty cool at the country club. Still, this is great isn't it?"

"Yes, it's great. It should all be over soon."

"Thank God."

"Absolutely. I do every single day," he said softly. "So, Breez, have you spoken to Bella today?" he asked coolly, even though he already knew the answer.

"No, why?"

"Because, you're supposed to be retrieving the gun you gave her."

"Oh, that. Okay, okay, I'll try to get to it first thing in the morning after Gordo leaves for work."

"Good. Okay, now that we have all the business out of the way, Breez, tell me what you're wearing."

Breez giggled. "Um, I have on a black teddy."

Joey grunted. He'd been playing around but it was a bad idea.

"And I'm wearing black fishnet stockings and three-inch spiky heels and that is all."

"Good grief, Breez. You do paint quite a picture."

She laughed. "So you tell me."

"I'm trying to force the picture out of my mind so that I don't leave my post and come over there."

"I don't want you to leave Bella alone, so I'll tell you the truth. I'm wearing a pair of gray cut-off sweats that are spattered with paint and

one of my father's old shirts, button-down collar, short-sleeved, light blue, also spattered with paint."

Joey blew out a breath. "Hmm, thought it would help. Still want to come over, but for Bella's sake I'll try to practice some self-control."

"Thank you, Agent Adams."

"You're welcome. Now, next order of business. Gordon's gonna be away and I want to play. Will you go out with me tomorrow night? And Saturday night too?"

She sighed. "I did promise, didn't I? So, *Bayside Grill,* right?"

"*Bayside Grill* on Saturday. Tomorrow night, how about the *Mishimaro*?"

"Oh! Well, that's pretty exclusive."

"Do you like Japanese?"

"Love it. And I l-o-v-e sushi and they have the best."

"I'll pick you up at seven and bring a bag."

"A bag? Why?"

"Because, I intend to talk you into staying with me at my loft and we'll have breakfast Saturday morning. No hanky panky, I promise. I just want time to get to know you and I don't know when we'll get another opportunity. Then we could go visit my mom and Eric and take an hour or so to walk on the beach, or swim in the ocean."

"Meet the parents, huh?"

"They don't bite."

When she didn't answer, he became concerned. "Breez?"

"Okay, we'll make it a weekend."

"Good. Also, before we hit the *Bayside Grill*, I thought Saturday afternoon you might go with me to visit your sister."

"Visit Bella? Sure. Why?"

"Landow left her with a list of chores so long she'll never get done. I thought we'd go over there and knock them out for her."

"Wow."

"Wow?"

"Joey, I don't know what to say. I never thought it possible that a man could be so unselfish and thoughtful."

Joey sighed. "Who do you base your judgments of men on, Breez? Your brother-in-law? Surely you realize he's not the norm."

"I hope he's not, yet since I've seen what a brute he is, I tend to recognize the same traits in most men to some degree or another."

"The same traits? Like we're bigger and stronger?"

"The same traits like you think you have the right to push us around and tell us what to do."

"Have I pushed you around?"

"Not yet."

Another sigh. "Have I told you what to do?"

"Uh, yeah."

"When?"

"When you told me to not have any dealings with Gordo."

"That was..."

"And you ordered me to take that gun back from Bella."

"Okay, those orders came from Agent Joseph Adams of Ameritech Security who is assigned to guard the welfare of your sister. Can you separate the two of us?"

She pouted. "Okay, okay, maybe you're right. Maybe I can't judge all men by Gordon."

"How about your father, he was a good man, right?"

"Yes, a wonderful man."

"So, maybe use him as your base."

"Good idea," Breez mumbled.

"So, are we straight on the plans?"

"Yes, but Saturday night we stay at my house. No hanky panky, as you put it."

"Deal."

✝✝✝

Proverbs 6:16 - 19

"These six things doth the LORD hate:
yea, seven are an abomination unto him:
A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent
blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations,
feet that be swift in running to mischief,
A false witness that speaketh lies,
and he that soweth discord among brethren."

Chapter Seven

Logan hung up the phone and turned with a smile.

"Who was that?" his mom asked.

"JoJo. He just wanted to make sure I brought a pack with water and a jacket. It gets cool in the mountains."

Bella nodded. "Are you excited about going?"

"Yeah. It's gonna be awesome."

Bella smiled. Her heart felt so very light. "I'll tell ya what– sit down and eat your dinner and afterward, we'll run out and buy a new backpack for you. The one you have is old and small."

Logan's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Sure. And after that, we'll stop and get some ice cream at *Brusters* if you want."

Logan smiled. "Okay. It's a date, just me and my mom."

Bella's eyes immediately welled with tears.

"Um, sorry Mom, I didn't mean to make you cry."

She shook her head. "They're tears of joy, Logan. When did you become such a little man, huh? So grown up." She went to him, mussed his hair. "You're a good son, you know that?"

"You're a good mom," he said softly.

Bella kissed his cheek. "Okay, then buster, get to eating. We have things to do."

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"Aww, Breez, have I told you how absolutely beautiful you are tonight?" Joey asked.

Breez took another sip of wine before she slowly lowered her glass. "You have once or twice."

He reached out, grabbed a dark curl and flicked it back and forth. "Strange how your hair is so curly and your sister's hair is so straight."

Breez laughed. "Well, not so strange. My hair is as straight as hers. I had my hair permed several years ago and everyone loved it and so I kept doing it. Now I'm so used to it, I've forgotten how I looked when

it was straight."

"You said everyone loved it, but did you love it?" Joey asked.

She shrugged. "Actually, I didn't at first. I liked my straight hair and I was horrified when I first looked in the mirror and saw the mass of curls. I cried for two days. And then I got used to it."

"Why did you do it if you liked your straight hair?"

Joey watched as her eyes turned sad.

Breez sighed. "I guess I wanted to be different from Bella."

"Why?"

"I was angry with her. How could she let that jerk push her around like he did? I couldn't understand it then. I confronted her. Told her I knew what was going on. She told me I was wrong and that I needed to mind my own business. Everyone used to say we were just alike, two peas in a pod, so, I permed my hair as a statement. I am *not* like her. I am strong. I will never let a man push me around."

Joey nodded. "I understand how you felt, yet now, you're no longer mad at her?"

She sighed. "No. I wanted so badly to understand what she was thinking that I volunteered to work at a shelter for abused women. I got to know them. I attended the group therapy sessions. I began to understand the mindset. I began to understand how an abusive man manipulates his woman's emotions. Makes her feel weak and dependent, and wreaks havoc on her self-esteem."

"And don't forget one of the major factors," Joey said.

"Which is?"

"Fear. It's easy to blame the woman. She's so weak. Why does she stay? Is she stupid? So, let's put the blame where it belongs– on Gordon. She fears him. She fears his ability to take away the only thing she loves. Fear is a powerful tool. In your sister's case, he may have lowered her self-esteem, or at least made her question it, but I believe that she believes in herself well enough. It's the fear. The fear of losing her child. Fear that he will hunt her down and kill her."

Breez frowned. "But he could kill her now."

"She feels she can control the rage as long as she stays, but not if she leaves him. Then he'll have nothing to lose. She will have pushed him over the edge."

Breez nodded. "I get it. I hate him. I so want to blow him away."

"Understood. You know though, my stepfather would tell you that

vengeance is an extremely negative emotion. It serves no purpose. It will not help the victim. It will not help you. It only helps to feed the hatred and the negativity in the world. We have to do what we can on the side of right and the rest is between the perps and God. 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.' People do horrible things to other people. That's why I went to work for Ameritech, to become a warrior to protect the innocent. It's the same reason Mark became a defense attorney. A different kind of warrior, but a warrior all the same. He defends the innocent. We don't do it to take revenge. Just to help. Never to hurt. Only to do what we can in what sometimes feels like a crazy world."

Breez watched him speak. Watched his warm brown eyes. His strong jaw. Her eyes lowered to his broad shoulders. Even his forearms were ripped with muscle. He spoke, not like the arrogant male she'd first thought he was, but like a saint, like a wise monk. Like a warrior for peace. Someone had to be strong and take care of the bullies of the world and that is what he does, but without malice. He does it out of love for humanity. She sighed. He is magnificent, Breez thought. And even better, this magnificent man wanted her. Good grief, she thought, her heart pounding, could she be falling in love with Joey Adams?

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"Bella?"

Bella and Logan, standing in line outside of *Bruster's*, both startled before they turned to see who'd spoken.

"Mark!" Bella said.

Mark smiled and placed his hand on Logan's shoulder. "Hey, Logan. Good to see you."

"Hi Master Mark. Is JoJo with you?"

"He's in the parking lot. He saw a friend."

"Oh," Logan said.

"Go on out. He'll be glad to see you. I'm getting him a double chocolate banana boat. Would you like one?"

"Oh, uh, sure."

"Go ahead. Your mom and I will bring it out to you."

"Thanks," Logan said as he hurried out to see JoJo.

Mark smiled down at Bella. "Hope I didn't mess up your spending some quality time with Logan."

"Oh, no," Bella said quickly. "I'm sure he doesn't mind a bit."

"And you?"

She blushed, which Mark found extremely attractive.

"No, I don't mind."

She turned, moved forward in line, then turned back to face Mark. "I can't believe we ran into you here."

"JoJo and I were out doing some shopping. Decided we needed to get sick on ice cream."

Bella laughed. "Same for Logan and me. Except we weren't expecting to go quite that far."

"Yeah, well, sometimes you just gotta let go and do it, you know what I mean?"

Bella nodded, wondering if he was speaking about anything other than ice cream.

Mark smiled. "So, I guess Logan is pretty excited about going biking with the boys."

"He's so happy to be going and it's so nice to see him smile."

"I know what you mean. It's nice to see you smile too."

She looked down at her toes then back up into his eyes. Mark was lost. Was it possible for a woman to be so appealing that you wanted to go against everything you know, break every rule, even vows, in order to be with her?

She bit down on her lower lip, looked like she might say something, then stopped herself.

"What?" he asked.

"Oh, I was uh, just gonna tell you that Gordon had to go out of town for the weekend."

Mark smiled at her. "I know."

"Oh. Oh, yes, I forgot. My house is wired. Gosh, I keep forgetting. I hope I haven't walked around in my birthday suit."

"Well, if you have, I'm sure Joey will be very discreet."

Bella's face turned red.

Mark couldn't help himself, he reached out and touched her cheek. "I love it when you do that."

"Do what?"

"Blush."

She put both hands to her cheeks.

Mark smiled and nodded behind her. She turned and moved up in line again, then turned back and smiled.

"It feels weird, you know, being out and about without Gordon."

"By weird I hope you don't mean you're feeling guilty," Mark said.

"Guilty? Of course not. What do I have to feel guilty about?"

"I think you might feel guilty that you're out having fun, smiling, feeling a little happy because your husband isn't here like a lead weight around your neck to keep you from it."

"Nonsense. I have every right to go out on a Friday evening and get my son and me an ice cream."

"Absolutely, but if he knew you were here with me, there would be hell to pay, huh?"

Her eyes moistened. "Yes, and you know that. Why bring it up?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I just wanted you to know that it's okay that we're here together. It's okay, Bella. We're gonna get you out of that situation and when we do, I intend for there to be many nights like this."

"Please don't say things like that."

"You do know that Gordon is in Bakersfield with another woman?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't surprise me and I don't care. She can have him."

"I'm glad that news doesn't hurt you. That tells me you truly don't have any feelings for him."

"He killed everything I once felt. Now, I only feel dread, and fear."

"That's why I want to protect you, Bella. I don't want you to ever feel fear again."

"Why? Why do you care?" she demanded. And the moment she asked she realized why she asked. Because she wanted to hear it one more time. *I care for you, Bella.*

He smiled. "I think you know why. I told you before, I care for you. For you and Logan. And I'll tell you something else; when the time is right, when you are free of Gordon both legally and emotionally, I intend to pursue a relationship with you, because I want you, Bella."

"May I help you?"

Bella turned abruptly. Mark stepped forward, ordered two double chocolate boats, a strawberry milkshake and nodded at Bella. "What would you like?"

"I'll have, um, I'll just have a vanilla cone."

"Make that a double vanilla," Mark said as he pulled out his wallet.

Bella allowed him to pay because she knew it would be futile to argue with him about it. The young man who took their order smiled at her as he handed her the cone. She nodded at him. Mark picked up both banana boats.

"Would you mind grabbing my shake for me?" he asked. "Come on, let's go find the boys."

They found them in the parking lot with a couple of kids Bella remembered being at the belt party. Mark doled out the treats.

"Thanks, Dad," JoJo said, licking at some chocolate that dripped from the side.

"You're welcome. Bella and I are gonna go sit over there at the sidewalk tables. You can come or you can stay with your friends, but you can't get into trouble. Which is it?"

"Well, if I can't get in trouble then I guess we'd better come with you," JoJo laughed.

The four of them made their way over to a vacant table.

They ate their ice cream and talked about the canyons where the boys would go biking. They talked about tomorrow morning's class. And they also talked about Logan now being a red belt and how far he'd come in a short time.

Mark told funny stories about some of his worst students and had all of them laughing. He teased Bella about her lack of coordination and consoled her that she was definitely not the worst he'd ever taught.

Logan watched his mom, watched her laugh, watched her face glow. He didn't miss the way Master Mark looked at her. And suddenly the longing came. A deep aching desire to stay like this forever. To have Master Mark and his mom get together. To have JoJo for a brother. To have family times together laughing and teasing and never ever have any worry that Master Mark would suddenly get angry and use his fists on his mother. Wouldn't it be heaven? Did he dare to even hope for something so wonderful? Would it ever be possible? It was possible. It had to be. Just look at his mom, licking her ice cream cone, her eyes all lit up. He had to make it happen. He looked over at JoJo.

"Hey, JoJo, isn't that Maya over there with those girls?"

JoJo turned and looked. "Looks like it. Wanna go say 'hi'?"

Logan smiled. “Sure.”

“Stay out of trouble,” Mark cautioned.

“I promise, Dad. You know you’ve been awful protective since Eric got his head bashed in.”

“Gee, go figure,” Mark replied dryly.

Bella laughed as she watched the boys cross the parking lot and meet up with a group of girls.

“They’re growing up,” she said softly.

Mark watched her. “Yes they are. You’re dripping.”

Bella turned quickly and licked at the cone. Mark had to fight himself as he watched. He wanted her, and he knew it wasn’t right but he couldn’t seem to help it.

She smiled at him. “Everyone else is finished. I’ve always been a slow eater. My mother used to complain at me constantly.” She shrugged. “Guess I just like to savor each exquisite bite.”

He swallowed hard.

She held the cone out to him. “Would you like some? I don’t think I could eat anymore.”

He would normally have turned it down, but the intimacy of eating after her had him intrigued. He took the cone from her, licked the places she’d licked, then took a giant bite, bringing the ice cream down even with the cone.

She giggled. “Well, you made short work of that, huh?”

He smiled as he quickly finished the cone. “I did.” He reached out and took her hand.

She tried to pull away, glancing quickly around her.

“No one is watching us,” Mark said.

Rubbing his thumb back and forth across her wrist he looked deeply into her bright blue eyes. She bit her lip and trembled, and he realized she was truly frightened.

“Don’t be afraid, Bella,” he said softly. “You know I would never hurt you.”

She nodded timidly. “Yes, I know. It’s just that, I guess I’m just imagining what would happen if Gordon came back early, if he walked up right now with you holding my hand.”

“First, if he came back early we would know, because Joey has an agent tailing him and he would let Joey know immediately if Gordon was on his way back, and Joey would let me know.”

"Oh." She sighed. "Oh, well, that's nice."

He smiled at her. "Yeah, pretty convenient. Second, even if he did walk up right now, do you think I would let him do anything to you?"

"He wouldn't do it in front of you. He'd wait until we got home."

"There's an easy solution for that."

"By all means, let me in on it," Bella muttered.

"Don't go home with him."

She snatched her hand away. "I told you, I need time."

"I know, and I understand, but I want you to know that soon Joey will have enough evidence to make sure Gordon does not get Logan in a custody hearing. When that time comes, I want you to promise me you'll take action."

She looked out toward where her son stood laughing and talking with kids his own age. It was so wonderful to see him having a good time. She glanced back up at Mark. "What does he have?"

"He has candid statements from you and Logan attesting to the abuse you've suffered at his hands. He has tapes of the constant verbal abuse. He has video of him hitting you in the face and then dragging you by your hair out to the pool. He has video of Gordon accosting your sister, threatening her, choking her in..."

"When? When did he do that to Breez?"

Mark sighed. "Wednesday evening after you and Logan left for your martial arts class."

She shook her head. "I didn't know."

He patted her arm. "I'm sorry. They also have video of him um, with some woman in your living room and then taking her upstairs."

Bella swallowed hard. "I don't care about that."

"I do. Grounds for divorce, Bella, and you're the injured spouse."

"It sounds like a lot, but it's not. He'll still get custody, and if he doesn't, he'll come looking for me."

"He'll have to come through me to get to you. I say bring it on."

Her mouth pressed tightly closed. "How very macho of you."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I'm just, well, I guess I'm just frustrated too, Bella. I want you out of there."

"Because you want me."

"I want you out of there because I care about you and Logan. Even if you told me right now that you and me will never ever be, I still will do anything to make sure you're safe."

Sighing, she held her hand out to him and allowed him to take it again. “I’m sorry, Mark, for being so hard to deal with. I’m so confused. I don’t know what to do. And– and I think about you, Mark. I imagine what it would be like to have you. I’ve relived that kiss a thousand times a day, every day since.”

“Me too,” Mark admitted.

Bella sighed. “If only things, circumstances, were different, but ‘if only’ is a dangerous game.”

His eyes on hers he slowly lifted her hand and placed a gentle kiss in her palm. “Circumstances will change, sweet Bella. And when you feel ready, I’m gonna be there for you. I’m gonna show you how it’s supposed to be between a man and a woman. I’m gonna make slow, sweet love to you. I want to see you happy.”

She closed her eyes against the tears and the longing. The man she’d been fantasizing about for the past two years was telling her he wanted her. All she had to do was get out of the abusive marriage she was trapped in. For just one second she dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, it really could become true.

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“Wow, nice place you have, Joey.”

Joey tossed the keys on the table by the door and placed Breez’s bag on the floor. “Thanks.”

Breez walked slowly around the loft apartment, fingering an expensive-looking chessboard displayed on a glass table between two chairs, running her hand over books on a shelf, feeling the heavy drapes and caressing the back of the large sectional sofa. “Very masculine, dark, strong, kind of like you.”

Joey snorted.

“What? You don’t think you’re any of those things?”

He moved forward and slipped his hands around her waist. “I’ll concede I’m strong and I believe I’ve proven my masculinity, but I could hardly be called dark.”

Breez giggled. “I guess I was being dramatic.” She cuddled up against his chest. “Did I tell you how much I enjoyed dinner tonight?”

He rubbed his cheek over her hair, moved close to her ear. “Many times. Did I tell you how much I enjoyed having dinner with you?”

She shook her head.

“I meant to.”

She pulled away and went to examine an abstract painting hanging above a desk.

He followed, standing close behind her, waiting for her appraisal.

"Well, Joey, *you* may not be dark, but this painting is. Dark and dangerous. The colors are rich, there's movement, like someone running, fear maybe, sound, like the beating of a heart. It's well done. Very well done." She bent slightly to examine the painter's signature. "JFK? Kennedy was an artist?"

Joey chuckled. "June Flower Kino– my sister."

"Really? How old is she?"

"She's twenty. She did this painting earlier this year. She was actually gonna destroy it, but I asked her if I could have it. I like it. I like its emotional impact."

"Why would she want to destroy it?"

"She painted it in response to a breakup with her boyfriend. Someone she'd been with since she was fifteen. It devastated her."

"Poor kid. I know how she feels. Still, she's an amazing artist."

"She says she dabbles."

"I hope she's doing this 'dabbling' full time. She's really good."

"No, not full time. She's actually a doctor."

"A doctor? A medical doctor?"

"Among other titles."

"Didn't you say she's only twenty?"

"Yeah, she's a very special kid. High genius level IQ. She's an amazing scientist, PhD this, PhD that."

"And she paints."

"Yep, and plays piano and composes."

Breez turned to face Joey, placed her arms around his neck. "How very interesting. I would love to meet her."

"You will, tomorrow."

"Ah, yes, tomorrow, time to meet the parents. Do you think your mother will like me?"

"I'm sure of it."

"How do you know?"

"Because Mom likes everybody— and everybody likes her."

"And your father?"

"He lives in San Francisco so you won't get to meet him tomorrow, however, you will meet my stepfather, Eric Kino. And yeah,

he'll like you too," Joey put in before she could ask. "Do I sense some trepidation on your part?"

She shrugged. "Maybe a little. I mean, my parents are gone. I've had no one to answer to for some time now, except myself I guess. Bella and Logan are all that's left for me as far as immediate family."

"Believe me, you don't have to answer to my parents. I just want you to meet them, so that you can know me better."

"And why do you want me to know you better?"

Smiling, he pulled her down onto the sofa, leaned over her. "Because I think you are an amazing woman, Breez, and I want to have a relationship with you. A real relationship. I want you to know that I'm here for you, and that even though you feel alone, you're not. You have me, and that means you have my family. That's the way it is with us."

"I don't know, Joey. I truly love being around you. I truly love being with you, still, I don't know if I'm ready for a 'real relationship'. I don't want to have to hate you later."

"Well, you can't go through life afraid to experience things for fear it may not turn out well. You have to take some chances, Breez, or you'll be lonely for the rest of your life."

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Saturday morning dawned bright and beautiful. Bella rolled over in her bed, kicked all the covers off and spread her arms and legs out as far as she could stretch, taking up as much space as possible.

It felt so good to be all alone. This certainly wasn't the first time Gordon had gone off for a weekend, yet today seemed different somehow. Maybe because she knew he wasn't gonna come home early and surprise her. She would be notified when he was on the way. Maybe it's because Logan is about to go off on an outing that he truly wants and deserves. Or maybe it was because she felt like a real person again. A woman. A woman who is desired and wanted.

Her mind went to where it had been dwelling lately, to the all too brief kiss she'd shared with Mark. He'd told her last night that he thought of it too. She licked her lips, gathered a pillow to her chest and hugged it. I am a person of worth, she thought. I am not pathetic. I am not lazy. I am not stupid. *I care for you, Bella.* Closing her eyes, she allowed herself a brief fantasy.

Mark appears at the door of her bedroom. She sits up, reaches out

to him. He moves slowly toward her, turns and locks the door. "You're so very beautiful, Bella," he says reverently. He is magnificent. He takes her in his arms, lays her back on the bed. Kisses her and then whispers, "I love you, Bella."

The knock on the door brought her out of it. Panicked, she jumped from the bed.

"Mom? Are you awake?"

Patting her chest to calm herself, she drew a breath, smiled. "Uh, yes, Logan, I'm up. I'll be right out."

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Mark held the kicking pad lower and nodded at Bella. "Okay, we'll try this. Go ahead, front kick."

Bella stepped forward and snapped out her leg and was surprised by the popping sound the pad made, which meant she'd actually made contact with it.

"Good!" Mark said. "Okay, try again, three with your right leg, three with your left."

She missed the second one on each leg, but he still praised her. She smiled up at him. He smiled back, warmly, kindly.

"Very good. Now, we'll change to a roundhouse." He adjusted the pad to a vertical position and nodded at her.

Biting her lip she tried to swing her leg around. She not only missed, but almost fell over.

Mark rose up, motioned to JoJo who'd been in one of the other lines waiting his turn to kick. "Hold the pad for her, Joe, while I try to help her with her form."

JoJo bowed slightly. "Yes, sir." He took the pad and held it.

"First, watch me," Mark said. He turned and performed a roundhouse in slow motion. "Notice the hip rotation," he said as he did it again. "Now, at full speed." He knocked the pad out of JoJo's hand.

"Sorry, sir," JoJo muttered as he retrieved the pad.

Mark stood behind Bella and placed his hands on her hips. "Okay, stand straight, balanced. Good." One hand moved around to her abdomen, the other touched her right thigh. "Lift this leg. Good." With her thigh in his large hand, he pushed her leg around to show her the movement and the path.

As JoJo held the kicking pad, he watched Mrs. Landow. Her face had turned a bright pink. JoJo kept a straight face but his eyes met

Logan's across the room. Logan had a smile on his face. JoJo looked back up at his father whose eyes never left Mrs. Landow. This was pretty cool. Last night he and Logan had talked privately. JoJo had sworn an oath to Logan that he would not disclose to anyone the things Logan told him. JoJo had insisted on one exception, his father, and that would be only if JoJo believed there to be a life and death situation. They hadn't had much time to discuss details, but bottom line, Logan hated his own father because he hurt his mother. He wanted his mother to divorce him and he hoped that somehow his mother would be interested in JoJo's father, which was totally cool as far as JoJo was concerned.

Bella's body was thrumming. Mark's hands felt hot and heavy everywhere he touched her. It was no big deal. She'd seen him work with many of the students in this way, but with her, each touch seemed to linger, each touch caused her heart to race. She gave in to the temptation and looked up at his face. His eyes bore into hers. His breath seemed labored. She felt drawn to him, had to resist leaning into him. It seemed time stilled as they stood looking into each other's eyes.

"Um, Dad, I mean, Master Mark, would you like me to have the class move on to the final stretches?"

Mark drew a quick breath, gave himself a mental shake. "Thanks, JoJo, I'll do it." He walked toward the front of the room. "Okay, class, line up!"

"Yes, sir," came the expected reply from all present.

Mark spoke to them briefly. Took time to praise a few who needed some bolstering. Reminded them to come prepared to spar on Wednesday night and led them through a final stretch before he dismissed the class.

At his desk, he accepted a few payments from students' parents and chatted with them until they finally took their leave. He looked up to see Bella just coming out of the dressing room. She wore jeans with a lacy pink blouse and white athletic shoes. Her shiny black hair was still up in the ponytail, but strands had come down all around her face and she looked utterly feminine.

JoJo and Logan emerged from the boys' dressing room, dressed in their shorts and t-shirts, their backpacks in one hand, their martial arts uniforms in the other.

"Mom, will you take my uniform home for me so I don't have to

carry it in my pack?"

Bella smiled. "Of course, Logan. So, are you excited?"

Logan shrugged nonchalantly. "Sure."

JoJo placed his uniform on the desk in front of Mark. "So, like, ditto for me, Dad."

"Got it," Mark replied.

The door to the studio opened and Taylor Kino walked in. Bella couldn't help but stare at the beautiful child. She had waist-length, slightly wavy, dark brown hair, eyes that appeared green, or gray depending on the light, an adorable turned up nose, beautiful mouth, and the golden-brown skin of her father's heritage.

"Hi, Taylor," Mark said.

She smiled, ran to him and gave him a hug. "Hi, Uncle Mark."

Mark glanced toward Bella. "Do you remember Taylor? She's Rick and Bree's youngest."

Bella smiled sweetly. "I do remember. I met you at the belt party. I don't think I could forget such a beautiful little girl."

Taylor smiled. "Thank you. I remember you too."

"So, where is everyone?" Mark asked.

"Dad dropped me off to tell JoJo and Logan that we're here and they can come on out to the car."

"And why didn't your dad send Eric in?"

Taylor grinned. "Cuz he has to have a little talk with Eric."

"Oh, I see," Mark said. "I wonder what he did now."

"He yelled at me."

"No, tell me it's not true."

"It IS true."

"Why did he yell at you?"

"Because I was looking in his backpack."

Mark frowned at her. "You know, that's his personal property?"

"Yes, I know. That's the same thing Dad said, but still, Eric shouldn't have yelled at me. He hurt my feelings."

Bella pressed her lips together to keep from smiling.

"They don't seem very hurt," Mark said.

Smiling, she only shrugged.

"Can we go on out, Dad?" JoJo asked.

"Yes, and don't run. Walk with Taylor."

Logan hugged his mother goodbye.

"Have fun," she said softly.

"I will." He turned to shake Mark's hand.

"Be safe," Mark cautioned.

"Bye, Dad. Bye, Mrs. Landow," JoJo said.

JoJo and Logan ran toward the door.

"Walk!" Mark commanded.

Logan stopped, turned and held the door open for Taylor.

The eight-year-old girl looked at him dreamily as she walked past.

Mark chuckled. "Uh oh, Logan may have just made a fatal mistake."

"What's that?" Bella asked.

"He treated Taylor like an equal. She'll be gaga over him now for at least, oh, I'd say, two weeks."

Bella laughed as she hitched her bag over her shoulder. "Well, I'd better get going."

Mark rose. "Have lunch with me, Bella."

Flustered, she clasped her hands together. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because, I'm a married woman. My husband is out of town. How would it look?"

"Do you have a dollar?"

"Huh?"

"A dollar, do you have one?"

She opened her bag, looked in her wallet. "Yes," she said as she pulled it out.

"Give it to me."

She handed him the dollar.

"That's my retainer fee. I'm now officially your attorney. You would be having a business lunch with your attorney."

Smiling, she shook her head. "Sorry, Mark, I can't do it. Besides, I have too much to do at home."

"Like what?" he asked, even though Joey had already told him.

"Gordon gave me a huge list of things to do while he's gone, and they *have* to be done. I was able to get to some things yesterday, but what I have left to do will probably take me all day and most of the night. I have no time to do lunch or anything else. As a matter of fact, I probably shouldn't have come to class this morning, but I couldn't

help myself."

"So, he gives you work to keep you occupied while he's off screwing some blonde bimbo." He caught himself too late. "Sorry."

Bella blinked, sighed. "It is what it is. I have to do it."

"Or what, Bella? What will happen if you don't?"

"I, I don't know."

"I do."

He moved fast, coming around the desk, taking her by the shoulders. "And you do too. I want you out of there, Bella."

"I know. I do too, but..."

"No buts. I want you out. Bella, I can't stand the thought, I..."

He looked into her eyes, wide now with fear and sadness and anger. He pulled her against him, cradled her head against his chest. "Oh, Bella," he crooned. "What am I gonna do? How can I help you if you won't help yourself?"

She sniffed and looked back up at him. He had her face cradled in his hands and he lowered his head. She couldn't help it. She couldn't resist the temptation. She lifted her face and waited for the touch of his lips. It was gentle. He barely touched her, nipping softly at her bottom lip. Once, twice.

"Sweet, Bella," he murmured. "*My* sweet, Bella," he said again, emphasizing the 'my.' And then his mouth covered hers. The kiss was slow and warm and sensual.

He gave a soft groan and her stomach jumped. She found herself wanting to make him do it again, make that masculine sound deep in his throat, a sound of pleasure. Her hands ran over his chest. She wanted to tear his uniform off him. Instead she clutched at the material. The soft kiss turned hard.

She realized, somewhere in her brain, that she had power over this wonderful man whom other women would love to have. And it made her feel wonderful.

Abruptly he released her. He ended the kiss, rested his forehead against hers. "Geez, Bella, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she whispered. And it was. How could she tell him that it was exactly what she wanted? What she craved. And more. She wanted more.

"No, it's not okay." He set her back from him.

Suddenly, she felt embarrassed. She'd practically thrown herself

at him. How needy was that? One minute she was telling him she couldn't have lunch with him and the next she's offering herself to him. What must he think of her? She stood tall, straightened her blouse. "Well, I guess I feel quite foolish."

"No, it's not that, Bella, it..."

"I– really need to go. I'll– see you next Saturday." Turning quickly, she hurried out the door.

"Bella, wait," Mark pleaded.

She didn't stop. Sighing heavily, he picked up a pencil from the desk and threw it across the room, then quietly cursed.

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As usual, Breez opened the car door before Joey could get to it. She stepped out and looked up at the sprawling mansion.

"Very nice. This is where you grew up?"

"Since I was seven. Before that, my mother, brother, sister and I lived in a tiny little three-bedroom split-level back in Atlanta."

"Georgia? Wow, there is so much I don't know about you."

Joey smiled. "That's truth. I'm trying to remedy that. So, my mother met Eric at a martial arts tournament in Atlanta. He took her on as his student. They fell in love and presto chango, here we are." He took her elbow. "Let's do this."

Joey led her up the wide circular steps, opened the large, deep red, double front doors that were engraved with gold oriental script, and ushered her into the home.

"Mom!" he called the moment they stepped inside.

Shelley Kino came running out of the kitchen. "Oh, I'm so glad you're here." She hugged Joey and kissed his cheek.

"Mom, I'd like you to meet Breez Sheridan. Breez, my mom, who will insist you call her Shelley."

Breez smiled sweetly and held out her hand. "Hello, Shelley, it's nice to meet you."

"Nonsense," Shelley said, bypassing the hand and hugging her tightly. "I'm so happy to meet you." She let her go and took her hand. "Come in, come in. Eric and I were just coming in from a walk on the beach. He stopped to take care of a potted fern that fell over near the pool. Please, have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you. Joey just finished feeding me a huge breakfast."

Shelley smiled at her son. "He does love to cook."

Breez took a moment to look the woman over. She could see Joey in her. The light brown hair, back in a braid that ended between her shoulder blades. Her face was young, smooth, her eyes large and brown like Joey's and her smile warm and full of love. She wore shorts and a tight tank top with running shoes.

Shelley smiled sweetly. "Do you mind if I just come right out and say that you are very beautiful?"

"Thank you," Breez answered smoothly. "Actually, I was just about to say the same thing to you."

"Oh! Oh, well, isn't that nice. Thank you."

"I can see where Joey gets his good looks."

"He is a cutie, isn't he?"

Joey rolled his eyes. "So, Mom, you said you were walking on the beach? Are you or Eric ill? Injured?"

"No, why?"

"I've never known either of you to just walk on the beach. Run sprints, yes. Jog three or four miles, yes. Walk, no."

"Okay, so we ran a few miles. Still, we walked the last hundred yards or so for a cooldown. However, for your information smarty pants, we do take long romantic walks on the beach."

Breez watched their interaction. Watched the love in Joey's eyes. He was a good man. Any man who loved and respected his mother the way Joey did had to be a good man. She looked up at Shelley. "So, Joey tells me you do the martial arts thing too."

"I do. It's very empowering. Makes me feel not quite so vulnerable."

Breez nodded. "I guess that's why my sister takes it with her son, though I don't think it's doing her much good."

Sighing, Shelley leaned over, took Breez's hand and squeezed. "I have actually met Bella and Logan. They were here for a party not long ago. She's very sweet."

"Too sweet," Breez added.

Shelley shrugged. "Maybe, if that's possible. Still, she is who she is, right? And you are who you are, just like God made you."

"Yes, but maybe if she were tougher she wouldn't find herself in the situation she's in," Breez blurted out and then stopped herself. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bring it up. It's just always there, near the surface."

"No problem. I understand and I know a little about her situation. I know it's hard, seeing someone you love going through what Bella is going through. I sense that you're a little angry with her that she isn't tough enough to stand up to her husband."

"Maybe. Maybe I am."

"Well, everyone is different. Some people are simply gentle souls. Unfortunately, those people are the ones taken advantage of by the cowards of the world. And on the other side of the coin, those are the ones us warriors have to protect. Still, as frustrating as it is, we must remember who is really at fault. It's not Bella. It's her husband. Now you, you seem to be a fighter."

"That she is," Joey put in.

"Well then, it's good Bella has you on her side," Shelley said.

Breez smiled sadly. "I guess you're right."

"It's not often that she isn't," Eric Kino said as he entered the room. He moved forward, offered his hand to Breez. "Hello, I'm Eric."

"Nice to meet you."

Eric smiled warmly. "And I you."

Breez couldn't help but stare. The man was magnificent. She knew he was the father of Ricky Kino who was like forty-something so this man was probably in his sixties. He had long thick black hair that was pulled back at the nape of his neck. It had a few streaks of gray at the temples. His skin was a dark bronze, his body a rock-solid wall of muscle and sinew. He wore nothing but shorts and some running shoes.

"Well, we just finished running and I'm in need of a quick shower, so if you'll excuse me, I'll just run upstairs."

"No problem, Eric. I'll show Breez around," Joey said.

Eric turned to his wife, held out his hand, smiled slyly. "Would you like to come up and scrub my back?"

Joey groaned. Shelley giggled. Breez grinned.

"You know I would," Shelley purred.

Joey rolled his eyes. "Just go, please."

"Be right back," Shelley said as she raced her husband upstairs.

"Yeah, right," Joey called after them.

"They are wonderful," Breez said once they were alone. "They're still so in love."

"They have what I aspire to have," Joey murmured.

"They both seem so young."

"Constant training both physically and spiritually. It's like a fountain of youth," Joey said.

Breez smiled. "I like them."

"I'm glad you do. Come on, I'll show you around."

They walked the large mansion while Joey told stories from his life. As he spoke, Breez realized he was very deep, very sensitive, very spiritual, and very serious. He'd come across that first day as being cocky and shallow. She'd completely misread him.

Breez didn't hear the music until they'd stepped onto the downstairs landing and even then it was muted. "Is someone playing the piano?"

"Could only be Jeffy. Come on, I'll introduce you."

Joey ushered her down the hall and opened a large white door at the end. Suddenly the music overtook them. Breez stood in the doorway, mesmerized, as she watched a beautiful girl play the music of angels. The girl was slim, had long, curly dark hair and golden skin. Breez couldn't see her eyes because they were closed. She listened in ecstasy until the piece was finished.

The moment she played the last note Jeffy opened her eyes. "Joey! It's so good to see you." She stood and rushed to hug him.

Joey wrapped his arms around his little sister. "I know you didn't miss me a bit. You're too busy to have time to miss anyone."

She frowned. "That's not true." She rose up and kissed his cheek, broke away and turned to Breez. "Hi, I'm Jeffy. You must be Breez. I'm so glad Joey brought you home so I can meet you. He's usually so secretive about who he's seeing. That means you are pretty darn special."

"Uh, Jeffy, you wanna shut it now?"

Breez smiled at the small girl. This beautiful little chatterbox was a doctor? A scientist? "That was a lovely piece you were playing. Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, right?"

"Yes! It's one of my favorites. I loovve Beethoven. Love him."

"Well you are just amazing. I saw one of your paintings at Joey's place. It was stunning," Breez said.

Jeffy frowned. "Oh, yeah, that one. A bad time." She shrugged. "Joey likes it for some weird reason."

"I like it too. It captures so much emotion."

"Yeah, I guess it does. Did you see the one in the upstairs hall?"

"No, we haven't been up there yet."

Jeffy took Breez's hand and pulled. "Oh, please, you just have to come up and see it. I don't want to leave you with the impression that I'm all goth or something." Gasping, she stopped suddenly and looked down at the hand she held.

Puzzled, Breez looked into Jeffy's face. "Is something wrong?"

Joey had been standing silently watching his sister interact with his girlfriend. He spoke up now, dreading what she might say. "Jeffy, maybe it's something you want to speak to me about privately."

She tore her gaze away from Breez, took a deep breath and smiled at Joey. "Oh, no, it's nothing." Jeffy suddenly reached out and hugged Breez. "I'm just so happy you brought Breez home to meet us. I just like her so much already."

Joey breathed a sigh of relief. He supposed he should've warned Breez that his sister, along with all her other qualities, had certain psychic abilities. At first they'd come on her in little ways, a feeling of dread, or knowing that something good was about to happen. Then as she became an adolescent she began to have uncontrollable vivid visions of events in the future, some quite disturbing. As she matured she was able to get a grasp on the control part of it and found that if she tried, she could take someone's hand and see glimpses of possibilities. Jeffy didn't call it their future or their destiny. She called it their possibilities or probabilities because free will was always a factor. He was dying to know what she'd just now seen that brought her up short like that. He'd have to grill her on that soon.

As they moved upstairs to see Jeffy's painting, Joey sincerely hoped all was quiet down at his parents' end of the hall.

"Oh, this is magnificent," Breez exclaimed as she examined the large painting, another abstract. "I love the colors."

Jeffy watched her face. "What does it make you think of?"

"Jeffy, that's not fair putting her on the spot," Joey reprimanded.

"No, that's okay," Breez said quickly. "I'd like to see how close I am to what she intended." She drew a deep breath. "Well, I see there's a storm, but it's over. It came on quickly, changed the world to darkness for just a moment, but left just as fast and once it was gone, the world seemed even brighter, more colorful, maybe, full of love and hope."

"That's it," Jeffy said softly, her voice full of emotion. "That's

exactly it." She hugged Breez.

"Breez is an artist herself," Joey said.

"Well, no wonder you understood so completely," Shelley interjected as she and Eric came out of their room and joined them. "Tell me, Breez, what do you paint?"

"Nature mostly. I truly love to paint. It is my absolute bliss."

"You should see the one hanging over her bed," Joey said.

Shelley smiled as Breez began to blush.

"He, uh, went exploring through my house. On his own," she added.

Eric chuckled. Joey shrugged and offered no apology.

"Do you have any pictures of your paintings?" Shelley asked.

"Um, I have a few on my phone and I have a website, not that anyone ever visits it."

"Let's go to the study and investigate her website," Eric suggested.

"Oh," Breez said, surprised. "Well, you certainly don't waste any time, do you?"

Eric smiled. "I try not to."

They moved downstairs and surrounded Breez in the study while she pulled up her website. Once she opened her gallery, she stood and walked away while everyone studied her paintings. She pretended to look over the books on the shelves but couldn't concentrate. Why did Joey even mention it? No one was saying anything. She was afraid to even look over at them. Her paintings must be so bad that they don't know what to say.

"Breez," Jeffy finally said. "Oh my goodness, you are magnificent!"

Breez wrung her hands together. "Oh, I wouldn't go so far as that."

"Well, I certainly would," Shelley said. "Your paintings actually take my breath away."

"Really?"

"You are really good," Eric confirmed. "Truly an artist."

"She is," Joey said. He pointed to one. "This is the one that's over her bed, and I gotta say, the computer really doesn't do it justice. You need to see it in person."

"Oh, Mom, you really must buy one of her paintings. Look at that one. Wouldn't that pond scene look wonderful over the dining room table?" Jeffy asked.

"I absolutely agree," Shelley said. "So, tell us, Breez, what's the going price on these?"

"Um, well, I don't know. I've never sold one. I've never even shown anyone other than my family and a few close friends. I mean, if you really want one, you can just have it. I'd be honored to have it hanging in your home."

"Nonsense," Shelley said quickly. "Your paintings are exquisite and I want you to know that they have value. They should be on public display in a gallery. You should have a showing."

"That's what I said," Joey put in. He smiled down at Breez, noting her frown. "What's the matter, Breez?"

"I don't know, it's just that, what if, well, I mean, what if they do get hung in a gallery for a show, what if no one likes them?"

"What if? Then you're right back to where you started, huh? Just painting for yourself. And there is certainly nothing wrong with that, but what if people really do like them? Wouldn't it make you feel good to share your art with the world?"

"Well, yes, of course it would."

Joey turned to Eric. "Eric, you know a bunch of people. So, how hard would it be to hook Breez up with a gallery?"

"Not hard at all. I have a friend who owns a gallery."

"Of course you do," Shelley said, clapping her hands together. "Your friend could take a look at Breez's work, let her know if she's ready for a show. I mean, it wouldn't hurt to ask, right?"

"Never hurts to ask," Eric said.

"And it wouldn't hurt to let him know that I just purchased one of her paintings for $5000, could it?"

"I imagine that wouldn't hurt a bit," Eric said, smiling at the expression on Breez's face.

"$5000? Are you kidding?" Breez said.

"Certainly not," Shelley said with a grin. "And I'll be getting a deal because once these paintings show they'll be worth a lot more than that, I guarantee you."

Joey shrugged. "Well, looks like that little item is taken care of. Whaddya say, Breez? Are you willing to take a chance? Do you believe in yourself enough to put it out there?"

Breez looked from face to face. This family was definitely one to be reckoned with. And I do love to paint, she thought. And I believe

I'm pretty good at it, "believe" being the operative word. Finally, she nodded. "I, uh, I think I'd like to see how my work measures up."

"Oh, yaaay," Jeffy crowed loudly. "This is wonderful! I just know you're gonna be a huge success!" She hugged Breez hard. "Let's go in the kitchen and celebra..." She stopped, reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell. "Dr. Kino," she stated firmly. "Yes ... Yes ... Who's on call? ...No ... I'm on my way ..."

Breez couldn't help but feel dizzy at the sudden change in demeanor. The girl that a moment ago seemed like a child was suddenly a complete professional, a doctor who'd been called on to save someone's life.

Jeffy tucked her phone away. "I'm sorry. I have to leave. A little boy was hit by a car. There are some neurological problems and they'd like to consult with me before surgery. It was nice to meet you, Breez. Mom, Dad, Joey, love you guys."

Breez watched as the young girl rushed out the door of the study.

"Sorry," Shelley said. "It happens all the time. It seems they can't live without her at that hospital."

"She seems to be a most incredible young lady."

"She is. She says one day she's gonna save the world. She's said it so many times that I've begun to believe her." Shelley sighed. "Would you like some lunch?"

"Maybe in a little while," Joey answered. "I think we'd like to take a walk on the beach first, maybe take a swim and then we'll eat some lunch. After that we need to go over to Bella's house and help her with some chores."

"Oh, well, isn't that sweet of you. Okay, you kids go play. Eric and I will make you up something delicious."

Joey kissed his mother's cheek. "You're the best." He turned, took Breez's hand, noting her furrowed brow. "Everything okay?"

Breez smiled at him, nodded. "Hm? Oh, yes. It's just that, wow, every minute with your family is like a ride on a roller coaster."

Joey grinned. "Yeah, but some people describe it more like being hit by a train. Come on, let's go– 'play'."

✞✞✞

Ecclesiastes 9:10

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither

working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."

Chapter Eight

Bella braced herself against the refrigerator and tried again. She'd already moved it a few inches. If she could just move it far enough to make room for her to wedge her body between it and the cabinet, she could put her back against it and let her legs do most of the work to push it away from the wall.

At the rate she was going she would never get the chores done. She probably shouldn't have taken the time to go out last night with Logan but it was worth it to see his happy demeanor.

She struggled against the giant appliance and was able to move it enough to get in beside it. Once in the small space, she placed her back against the side of the refrigerator, then lowered her body until her knees were braced against the side of the cabinets and giving it her all, she pushed and grunted.

"What are you doing?"

Gasping, she struggled to stand straight but found herself tightly wedged in. She looked up to see Mark's face peering at her. "Oh, Mark, oh, you scared me. What are you doing here?"

"I came to help. And don't even think about refusing. Now, come out of there."

She tried to stand back up but got nowhere fast. Relaxing into her position, she began to giggle.

Mark smiled at her. "What?" When she didn't answer but continued to laugh, he guessed. "You're stuck aren't you?"

She nodded without speaking because she was laughing too hard to get any words out.

Mark chuckled and moved the refrigerator away from the cabinets. Bella slid the rest of the way to the floor.

"Give me your hand," Mark ordered.

She lifted it obediently, her eyes still twinkling. He grabbed her hand and pulled her up.

"Thank you," she managed.

"You're welcome."

"But Mark, I really can't let you help me clean my house."

"Bella, there is really no way that you can stop me so you might as well accept my help."

She sighed. "Mark, about earlier..."

He placed his finger to her mouth, looked into her eyes and nodded his head upward to help her remember the cameras. "We'll talk later. Right now we have work to do. Now, where's the list?"

Bella motioned toward a legal pad lying on the countertop. Mark walked over and began to read it. He kept his mouth shut, his jaw clamped tight as he read the ridiculously large amount of work one small woman was supposed to get done or suffer the consequences. He nodded. "Let's do it."

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They'd ridden a couple of hours and stopped on the trail to have lunch. While Ricky, Bree and Taylor rested, the boys had climbed to the top of the hill to sit on the edge of the cliff.

"This place is so cool," Logan said reverently.

JoJo nodded. "Yeah, my mom always likes to stop here for lunch. And up here on the cliffside, it's one of mine and Eric's favorite places, right Eric?"

"Oh yeah. There's a feeling here, for sure. I mean, like, a close to God kind of feeling, you know what I mean? Dad says 'close to nature, close to God.'"

Logan nodded his head. If any other kid had said something like that, they'd be laughed at, but it seemed Eric Kino could say anything and make it sound cool.

Logan looked out over the canyon. They sat atop a high cliff. About thirty feet across was a twin outcropping. A long way straight down from the top, a small river bubbled over rocks. On both sides, just below the top cliff was a second ledge.

"My dad and Uncle Mark and Uncle Joey have climbed down to the second ledge before," Eric said.

Logan looked over the edge. It was a very long way down to the bottom. "You're kidding?"

"They had all the mountain climbing equipment, so it was no big deal," JoJo added.

"Big enough," Eric corrected. "Dad says it's like two hundred feet

down to the river and it freaked him out a little."

Logan peered down again, then turned his face upward. The sky was bright blue, the leaves on the trees were beginning to turn colors and there was a crispness in the air. A breeze was blowing, stirring the trees. Birds chirped, insects buzzed and if you tried really hard you could hear the water below. Everything felt clean and simple.

Logan listened as JoJo and Eric described the feelings they had here in this place. He'd never heard his two friends speak so seriously and he was glad they did now because he too could feel the specialness of this place and he didn't want to be the only one. He was glad he could share it. "I'm glad you guys feel that way because I was worried you'd make fun of me if I said something like that."

"Make fun of you? Come on, Logan, you must know us better than that. We don't make fun of anyone," Eric said.

"Well, we do sort of make jokes about people sometimes," JoJo admitted. "But that's usually about girls and stuff. But we can be serious. Part of our training is to listen."

"Listen to what?" Logan asked.

JoJo shrugged. "Just listen. Quiet all the talking inside our brains and listen to the quiet. That's how we hear God speak to us."

"God speaks to you?"

"Well sure. We pray, He answers."

The two older boys studied Logan a moment.

"Do you believe in God?" Eric asked.

Logan shrugged. "I've never really thought about it."

JoJo nodded. "Well, He's real. Really real. I mean, I pray, and He actually gives me answers. I just have to sit quietly and calm down my brain enough to hear. Sometimes it's like, He puts an idea in my head that I would never think of, or like, gives me a feeling that I need to be careful. Talkin' to God, it helps us to know like, what's the right thing to do, ya know?"

Logan nodded. "That's pretty cool. I've heard Master Mark and Master Kane talk about meditation and stuff and how important it is, but I guess I've never really tried it."

"You should."

"But isn't that like, the people in India or something?"

Eric smiled. "You mean like Hindu people. Yeah, they meditate too, and Buddhists do too, the difference is, they don't worship the one

true God. We pray to the Father in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and then we just try to concentrate on our breathing so our mind won't be all over the place and then when we stop thinking so hard, we can hear or feel what God is trying to tell us."

"I don't really even know how to pray and stuff," Logan said.

"We can show you," Eric volunteered.

"We could do it now," JoJo said. "This place is really good for praying and listening to the quiet. Eric and me, we do this joint meditation thing."

"What's that?" Logan asked.

Eric sat up straight and crossed his legs into a full lotus.

"It's just meditating and praying together," JoJo answered. "Eric usually does the talking and I just listen to his directions. It's pretty cool. Wanna try?"

"Sure," Logan said.

"Okay," JoJo said. "So, how we'll do it is, we'll sit in a circle facing each other and keep our hands touching. That way we can help you to relax your mind and listen. Eric and me, we've had some totally cool stuff happen when we're doing it."

Eric nodded. "Yeah, I got the idea from my parents. They pray and meditate like that out on the beach. My mom told me a long time ago she wasn't really into all that but my dad helped her by including her in his prayers and meditations. He said he was sharing God's light."

Logan nodded. "Sounds cool." He moved around to join the circle and pulled his legs in as tight as he could.

JoJo joined him on the other side. Then the boys reached out and clasped hands.

Eric began to speak. "Father, so, it's me, and JoJo and Logan, but I guess You know that." He stopped and glanced at the other guys and shrugged. "Anyway, Father, we just wanted to talk to you for a minute. We, uh, wanna say thanks for us gettin' to be here together today. Um, JoJo and me, we wanted to help Logan learn to pray and listen for Your answer, so, we just want to hear You today. We hope you'll be with us and help us. In Jesus' name, amen."

"Amen," JoJo said and squeezed Logan's hand. "Say 'amen.'"

"Amen," Logan repeated.

Eric smiled. "Okay. Now, everyone, take a deep breath and let it out. Do that three times." He waited. "Now, pretend you see, like Jesus

way up above us, looking down from the sky. He's shooting light out of His hand to us. Inside His light is love and kindness and like, everything good. It's the light of Christ. The light comes to each of our heads and enters our bodies. We can feel it's really warm. It moves through our body, down our spine into our arms and legs, fingers and toes."

As Eric spoke, Logan could almost feel the warmth of the light as if it was real. He felt Eric's and JoJo's hands get hot. His breathing slowed. He tried hard to hold onto the feeling, to visualize the light.

"Now, concentrate only on your breathing. Only on breathing in, then on breathing out. If your mind wanders, it's okay. When you figure out that your mind has wandered, just bring it back to think about only your breathing."

Logan breathed and concentrated on the in and out of his breath. He began to feel funny. Tingly. Warm. He began to feel as if all his troubles were not really that bad, his father, his mother, it was all gonna be okay, and then he realized his mind had wandered and he quickly concentrated on his breathing again.

"Let go of all hatred," Eric chanted, trying hard to remember some of the subjects his father had used in joint meditations. "Let go of small troubles. Let go of resentment of others. It doesn't do you any good. It only hurts you. You gotta let go and let God. Forgive others for the things you think they've done wrong, for it is not our place to judge. Let go and allow. Let go and allow, means like, to say yes to whatever current thing is goin' on in your life. Uh, that means like, just accept. Just allow and then, let it go."

Logan didn't know what was happening to him, but tears began to run down his cheeks. He couldn't pull his hands away to wipe them and was terrified to think that his friends might open their eyes and see him sitting here crying like a stupid baby. It was weird the way he felt. Like a release. Like he could let out all his troubles right here and now and this special place understood him. Or maybe it was Jesus. It was like he actually felt that love that was in the light of Jesus, and the love was now in him and telling him everything would be okay. It even seemed he knew who was in the light with Jesus, and they were telling him that all his troubles were coming to an end. Only, why did he have to go and cry? He tried to let his mind concentrate again on what Eric was saying but it was too late. Eric was talking about opening eyes on

the count of three and getting a new look at their special place.

The moment his friends let go of his hands he opened his eyes and quickly wiped his cheeks. JoJo and Eric were both looking at him. He was mortified. They knew. They knew he'd been bawlin' like a baby.

"Uh, you okay, Logan?" JoJo asked.

Logan shrugged, stood, and turned away. "Sure."

Eric and JoJo looked at each other and nodded. They stood and went to where Logan leaned against a tree.

"Hey, Logan," JoJo began. "Uh, look, it's like this. I mean, me and Eric, we know about stuff. I mean, we know about what's going on with your mom and dad."

Logan cringed. He didn't want to talk about it.

"It's okay," Eric said. "I understand you don't want to talk about it. But, we want you to know that if you did, we'd listen. It's gotta be hard, your dad hurting your mom. Do you hate him?"

Logan looked up and he couldn't stop the words from pouring out. "I hate his guts. I wish he were dead. I know that's not how I'm supposed to think, but that's how I feel."

"That's cool," JoJo said. "I get it. I mean, I think I'd feel the same way if I were you."

"You would?"

"Sure," Eric said. "Look, it's not your fault your mom ended up marrying a loser. And your mom is a really nice lady. Of course you want to hurt someone who's like, hurting her, you know? Even though he's your father and all, well, that's just gotta make it so much worse."

"You know what I wish?" Logan said, before he could stop himself.

"What?" JoJo and Eric said together.

Logan shrugged. "Oh, nothin'. Never mind."

"Come on, Logan," JoJo whined. "You can tell us. I mean, it's kinda like you're our brother or somethin'."

Logan looked up, startled. "Yeah, I mean, that's what I was gonna say. I wish I was like, your brother. And Master Mark was my father. I wish my real father was dead and my mom and your dad got together and you and me, we would be brothers. Stepbrothers I guess, but that would be good enough."

"That would be so awesome, cool," Eric crowed. "Then you and I would be step-cousins. You'd be a real member of our family."

"I'd love to have a brother," JoJo said.

Eric frowned as he concentrated, picturing his Uncle Mark and Logan's mom together. He nodded. "It could happen. I mean, I don't know about your father being dead, but they could get divorced and I know Uncle Mark is already interested in your mom. But..."

"But what?" JoJo asked.

"I mean, we don't have to wait. We can be brothers. All three of us." He pulled out his trail knife.

"Uh, we're a little old to be like, blood brothers like some stupid kids who cut their fingers and press them together," JoJo said.

"I'm not talking about blood brothers. I'm talking about taking a blood oath. I mean, we didn't have the luck to all be born to the same parents. Me and JoJo got lucky coming to the same family, but the three of us together, we can make our own family. We can swear a blood oath that we'll be like brothers, act like brothers from this day forward. We could just say the words, but the blood, the pain acts like a seal, makes it more powerful."

"You read this somewhere, didn't you?" JoJo asked.

"It was in one of Dad's books about the Native Americans," Eric admitted. "But just because I didn't think of it myself doesn't mean it's not as good."

JoJo laughed. "No, it probably means it's better."

Logan smiled.

"So, are we in?" Eric asked.

"I am," Logan said.

JoJo nodded.

"But before you say yes, I'm not talking about some little nick on the finger. I'm talking about a good cut across the hand."

JoJo shook his head. "Of course you are because I think you get off on pain."

Logan looked at the two friends. He was in awe of them. They accepted him so readily. He couldn't help but ask the question. "But why? Why do you guys want to be my brother?"

"You're kidding, right?" JoJo said. "Logan, you're just like us. You're not punky or smart alec. You don't go around bragging. And the fact that you understand this place," he said, waving his hand in the air, "and that you did the meditation without laughing and stuff."

"And you're just totally cool, man," Eric added. "You tell good

jokes, you're smart and you're even younger than us but no one could tell. Heck, we're like the freakin' three Musketeers."

Logan smiled. "More like mouseketeers."

Eric laughed. "See? Totally cool. So, you ready?"

Logan stretched out his hand. Eric grabbed his wrist and sliced Logan's palm. Logan tried his hardest not to flinch even though it hurt like heck. JoJo held out his hand and Eric cut his palm. Then Eric handed the knife to JoJo and let him perform the same on him.

"Now what?" Logan asked.

"Now, we solemnly swear that we will be like brothers for the rest of our lives. That we will keep each other's secrets and we will tell each other everything. We will defend each other from all enemies and we will always have each other's back."

"I swear," JoJo said.

"I swear," Eric said.

"I swear," Logan said.

"Now shake hands."

One by one they clasped each other's hand.

"Okay, you've been up here long enough, guys. Bree says she wants to get going. She wants to make the higher trails before it gets too late."

The boys jumped apart as Ricky's deep voice startled them.

Eric looked up at his father, shoving his hand behind his back.

Ricky smiled. He couldn't help but notice the bloody knife in his son's hand and other hands hidden behind backs. "Blood brothers, huh?"

Eric sighed. "Blood oath, Dad," he corrected.

Ricky sighed. "Where did you learn that?"

"From your book on Native Americans."

Ricky nodded. "Ya know, just because it's in a book doesn't mean it's a good thing to do."

Young Eric frowned. "But like, they do blood rituals in the Bible."

Ricky nodded. "Okay, I see what you're thinking, but those rituals were covenants between God and man in the Old Testament part of the Bible, and then Jesus was the ultimate and *final* blood covenant."

"Oh, so, did we do something to make God mad at us?" JoJo asked.

"I think God understands what you were thinking. He knows your

heart, so I don't think He's mad. Just remember, rituals, blood oaths, can be associated with some pretty bad things, like human sacrifice and sorcery and the Bible does forbid sorcery because it was introduced to humans from the Nephilim. So, from now on, maybe just give your word. If you are always honest and truthful, then your word is good enough. You don't have to swear an oath."

The boys all looked down as they thought.

"Hmm," Ricky said, deciding he'd said enough. Drawing a deep breath, Ricky looked around him. "Great place here, huh?"

"Yes," all three boys said at once.

Eric looked up at his father's eyes and wondered if he was in trouble. Sometimes his dad was deceptively calm.

"So, it's gonna be hard to ride your bikes now," Ricky said. He nodded specifically at JoJo. "Did you even think about the fact that you have a team depending on you to throw a football?"

JoJo bit his lip. He hadn't thought about that at all.

Ricky continued. "Okay, so, I completely understand the brotherhood thing, but may I offer some first-aid before your mother gets a look at those hands and totally freaks?"

The boys pulled out their hands and looked closely at the wounds, then back up at Ricky.

"Yes, sir," they all said.

Ricky immediately dropped his pack off his back and pulled out a first-aid kit. "Sit down."

He cleaned and bandaged up the boys' hands, working quickly before Bree and Taylor came up to see what was taking so long.

"Looks like it's not too deep," he said to JoJo. "Hopefully you'll be able to function. Your dad might be mad, though. At you and at me."

"Sorry, Uncle Rick," JoJo said.

Ricky smiled at the trio. "It's gonna hurt a little while, kiddos. Think you guys can handle the pain while you ride your bikes?"

They smiled at each other bravely. "Of course," they all said and broke into laughter.

Ricky's eyes danced. "I would expect no less of you. Let's go."

~~**~~

"Well, hello there," Breez chirped cheerfully as she and Joey stood at Bella's kitchen door.

Bella and Mark turned from emptying a cabinet.

"Breez! What are you two doing here?"

"We came by to help. Looks like we're not the only ones."

Bella frowned. "I don't know what's gotten into everyone. I can certainly clean my house all by myself. I've been doing it for years."

"Bella?" Breez said.

"What?"

"Shut up." She came in, set her purse on the counter, grinned up at Mark. "Hi, I'm Breez."

Mark smiled at her, offered his hand. "Hello, Breez. I'm Mark."

"Wow, you look a lot like Joey. I mean, totally a cutie."

Mark grinned widely. "But I'm taller," he bragged.

Joey rolled his eyes. "He's got two inches on me, but I'm faster."

"Oh, you're fast all right," Breez chirped. She looked around. "So, what's left to do?"

"Bella and I were just starting on the cabinets. After that we have the garage left," Mark said.

Joey nodded. "Why don't we let the women work on the cabinets and you and I can knock out the garage. That okay with you, Breez?"

"Sure," she said with a smile.

Joey grabbed her hand, pulled her close, planted a kiss on her mouth. "Good. We'll race."

Mark and Joey went out to the garage. Breez looked at Bella with a smile. "What?" she asked, noticing Bella's look of confusion.

"I thought you told me it was just an act between the two of you."

"It was– at first. And then, I don't know, he sort of grows on you, know what I mean?"

"He's definitely a cutie pie," Bella agreed.

"Cute? The man is gorgeous. And wow, you should see him without his shirt on."

Bella rolled her eyes.

"Don't roll your eyes at me, big sis."

Bella sighed. "Big sis. You haven't called me that in a long time."

"Cuz I've hardly seen you and whenever I do see you, Gordo is hovering like some vulture, ready to pounce on anything we say."

"It's been nice having a few days without him," Bella said as she wiped out the cabinet, making sure it was free of any crumbs.

"See? That's how it would feel if you were to leave his sorry butt.

You could finally breathe. Life wouldn't seem so, I don't know– over?"

"I know he has no right to hit me, Breez. I admit I'm afraid to lose custody of Logan. And you know what? I don't think I can live like this much longer."

"Woohoo! Now you're talking!"

"Mark says they think they'll have enough on him after this week so that I can leave him and still get custody of Logan. Of course, the leaving will have to be planned very carefully. I'm just so afraid that whatever they have against him won't be enough. They really don't have one of his bad episodes on tape, where, you know..."

"Ya mean where he beats the hell out of you?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what I mean."

"Bells, he could kill you if we wait for him to get really mad. I think we have enough. Joey says Justin Lee, who is the senior partner at Mark's firm, has just as many friends in high places as Gordo does."

Bella nodded. "That's what Mark says too. I hope it's true. If not, things could go very wrong and I can't lose Logan, Breez. Please understand, I can't lose my baby."

"I do understand, sis. Really, I do."

Two hours later, the four sat around the kitchen table telling tales on each other.

"But Joey was the one with the temper," Mark said. "I can't tell you how many times I had to cover for him with Mom, and Eric and especially with Ricky."

"Ricky?" Bella asked. "Why did you have to answer to him?"

"He trained us. I mean, Eric is *the* Grandmaster, but Rick is also a Grandmaster. He took over our training for the most part. He lived at the house until we were, what?" Mark motioned at Joey.

"He moved out when I was like thirteen, but he kept his room at the house enough to have to answer to him. And Ricky always seemed to know when *I'd* gotten in trouble, and then I'd tell him I had no choice. And then he'd say..." Joey stopped and gestured at Mark.

"There's always a choice," they chanted together.

Breez giggled. Bella smiled.

"Breez was the troublemaker in our family," Bella offered. "So, she and Joey make a good pair. Maybe together they can keep each other out of trouble."

Breez wrinkled her nose. “I was not a troublemaker. I simply had my own way of doing things.”

“You mean like the way you took Dad’s car out when you were fourteen and ran it right into our neighbor’s mailbox?” Bella said.

Breez shrugged. “I was jealous that you got to drive and I didn’t.”

“I’m four years older than you, squirt. Of course I did.”

“Three and a half years and you got to do everything first and then you went off and left me.”

“I didn’t leave you. I went away to college.”

“And never came back. It was never the same. You only came back for the few months it took to plan your wedding.”

The conversation took a dive.

“Well,” Joey said. “I believe they call that ‘water under the bridge.’ So, Breez and I have plans to hit the *Bayside Grill* for dinner. You guys want to tag along with us young ones?”

Mark looked at Bella, though he knew she would refuse.

“I really can’t,” Bella said. “Please understand. I’m married. I can’t take the chance that someone he knows will see me out with Mark.”

“You’d be out with friends,” Breez argued.

“You know that wouldn’t matter. Besides, Logan will be home in a few hours.”

Joey stood. “I actually agree with Bella. And I’m pretty sure Jason would not be happy about Bella and Mark going out no matter how innocent. So, Breez and I will be off. We’ll do our best to stay out of trouble all on our own.”

Mark stood, shook his brother’s hand. “Thanks for the help, Joey.” He leaned over, kissed Breez’s cheek. “Have fun.”

“Oh, we will,” Breez said with a smile.

Breez hugged her sister, took Joey’s hand and left.

Bella thoughtfully watched them go. “I think my sister is actually falling for your brother.”

Mark nodded. “I think my brother is actually falling for your sister.”

“That is so wonderful,” Bella said sadly.

“You don’t sound like you think it’s wonderful.”

Bella looked up, eyes wide. “Oh, I do. Really. It’s just that, it’s so hard to be happy about anything right now. Does that make me just a horrible sister?”

"Not at all. It's understandable. Listen, Bella, you have to eat and I understand you not wanting to be seen in public with me, no matter how innocent, so, let me cook dinner for you at my house."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Sure you could. I mean, nothing indecent going on, just friends having dinner."

Her lips pressed together tightly. She shook her head.

"Yes," he argued. "Please, Bella."

"What about Logan?"

"Hmm, I'll give Ricky a call and get them to drop him off when they bring JoJo back."

She thought another moment or two and finally smiled. "Okay, I guess it will be all right."

"Great. Let's get out of here."

"Let me get cleaned up," she said.

It didn't take her long. Then, together, they took a few moments to walk through the house, make sure they hadn't overlooked anything, locked up and headed to Mark's home, which was a good thirty- to forty-minute drive.

Once on the interstate, Mark dialed Rick's cell.

"Hey, Mark," Ricky said when he answered. "I was just getting ready to call you."

"About what?"

"Our outing has gone on a little late and the kids are dying for us to stop at this pizza place on the way back, and then the boys want to know if they can stay the night at our place. I promise to have JoJo back no later than ten in the morning."

"Sure, it's fine with me. Bella is with me. Hold on and I'll see what she has to say."

He turned to Bella. "The boys want to stay the night at Ricky's house. He promises to have them home in the morning bright and early."

Bella chewed on her lip, glanced up at Mark. "The agent following Gordon is gonna let Joey know when he's on his way home, right?"

"Yes. If it will help you to rest easier, I can have Joey get an update on Gordon's activities."

"That would be great." She heaved a sigh. "I guess it would be okay for Logan to stay. I'm sure he's having a great time."

Mark nodded, spoke into the phone. “Okay, Ricky, it’s a done deal. Tell JoJo I said to behave.”

“Oh, I think I can handle him,” Ricky quipped.

Mark laughed and tossed his phone down in the console. “So, Bella, you’re free for the night.”

Bella smiled. “Well then, in that case, I think I’ll have a glass of wine with my dinner.”

“Your wish is my command,” he said as his phone rang again.

“Joey, everything okay?”

“Yeah, listen, I meant to have Breez remove that gun from Bella’s house while we were there today. Would you mind grabbing it before you leave? Jason is not comfortable with it there and neither am I.”

“Sorry, bro, actually, I’m already gone. Bella and I are on the way to my house for dinner.”

“Oh– oh, well, that’s interesting. Well, good for her.”

“Yeah, listen, she wants an activity report on Gordon, otherwise she’s pretty nervous. Can you get me an update?”

“Will do. Backatcha in five minutes.”

Mark glanced over at Bella. She’d taken a moment to shower and change before she’d left the house. She wore a simple knit dress, the same blue as her eyes. Her hair remained in the ponytail she often wore. He itched to take it down. She seemed to be in another world as she gazed out the windshield. He cleared his throat to get her attention. “Do you like spaghetti?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Everyone I know. It’s one of my best dishes. I’m not a gourmet chef like Joey, but I can find my way around a kitchen.”

She smiled, imagining him with an apron tied around his waist, moving back and forth between the refrigerator and stove and sink as he prepared a meal. She imagined he would do it the way he does everything else. Carefully, thoughtfully, and well, just like he kisses.

Her mind had dwelled on the morning’s kiss on and off all day. He awakened something in her. Something she hadn’t felt in a long time. Desire. Or maybe lust. Whichever, it hadn’t gone away. The feelings had come in such a rush and all she’d wanted was for him to love her. Yet he’d pushed her away. She understood he didn’t want to compromise her situation. Still, she’d been willing to take a jump off the high dive. Well, maybe the low dive. This morning she’d been

willing to let Mark know that she was attracted to him. In her mind, that was a very big deal, a very big step for her.

It'd been somewhat embarrassing that he'd been the one to stop, thus her hasty retreat. Everyone keeps telling her to buck up and do something. That's exactly what she wanted to do. Of course, they were talking about her taking steps to get out of her abusive situation, but to her, allowing herself a selfish pleasure like a kiss from an attractive man, was a tiny step in the right direction. A step toward taking back her right to be happy.

Her marriage was a sham. Gordon had been off all weekend with another woman. Why is it okay for him and not for her? The marriage is over. It'd been over for years now. She didn't love him anymore and he certainly didn't love her, because you can't love someone and pound on them at the same time.

Mark's phone went off again and he answered and handed the phone to Bella.

"Hello," she said timidly.

"Bella, this is Joey. At this minute Gordon is in a restaurant at the hotel in Bakersfield, nibbling on the ear of a woman named..."

"I don't want to know her name."

"Okay, well, he's several hours away from you and has not checked out of his hotel. He has a massage scheduled at ten in the morning and a tee reservation at noon. I doubt he will be leaving until sometime late tomorrow afternoon."

She nodded. "Thank you, Joey, for taking the time. You and Breez have a nice dinner."

"You and Mark do the same."

She placed the phone gently in the console, settled back in her seat and smiled.

"Everything okay?"

"Everything is fine," she said softly. "How much longer?"

"We're almost there."

She watched out the window of Mark's SUV as the scenery changed from malls and storefronts to small residential homes, back to malls and back to suburbia America. As they got closer to the ocean the names of the streets changed from Maple Drive and Church Street to Sunset Circle and South Beach Avenue. Finally, he pulled up to a larger ranch home with a well-manicured front lawn, lovely ornamental

grasses and shrubs and a two-car garage.

She smiled at him. “This is lovely.”

“Not quite the mansion-style living you might be used to, but it fits into my current salary nicely and is only about five minutes from the nearest beach.”

“I think it’s wonderful. Mansion-style living isn’t always as perfect as it seems.”

He nodded. “I guess not.”

He took her in through the front door. The inside was full of light, Bella thought. So unlike the dark woods and heavy drapes at her own home. The floor plan was open and airy. You could see part of the kitchen from the front door. A large, beige sectional sofa broke up the space between living and dining. More chairs with accent tables and lamps completed the living space along with a giant cabinet against the wall opposite the sofa. The doors to the cabinet were open and she could see the conventional man-toys. Large screen TV, stereo, all kinds of electronic gaming devices. She smiled.

They moved through the dining room which was sparse, containing only a round glass table with four chairs. Mark tossed his keys onto the breakfast bar that separated the dining room from the kitchen.

Bella eyed the ultramodern kitchen. “Now, that’s a great kitchen.”

Mark grinned. “It was the point that tipped the scales when I was trying to make a decision to buy the house.”

It was large, open, with shiny black and white granite counters, sleek black cabinets, high-end stainless steel appliances. A cooktop occupied a portion of the island which had its own small sink.

Mark rubbed his hands over his dirty t-shirt. “Well, if you don’t mind, I’d like to clean up before I start cooking.”

Bella nodded. “Go right ahead,” Bella said as she slipped onto one of the soft bar stools.

Mark smiled. “Well then, let me get you a pre-dinner glass of wine to sip on while you wait.”

“Okay.”

She watched him bend down and open a cabinet where several bottles of wine rested in a rack. He chose one, pulled it out, read the label, nodded, reached up into a cabinet just above, grabbed a couple of wine glasses and brought it all over to the bar where she sat.

He went back for the corkscrew. She watched his actions, fascinated by the hands that she'd seen do so many things. Break boards, muss his son's hair, drive, write and even scrub floors. The same hands he had pressed against her hips that morning. Hands she'd imagined touching her. Strong hands. Capable hands. Never hurting hands.

He poured the wine, tasted his own, then handed a glass to her.

"Enjoy," he said. "I'll be just a minute."

She watched him walk around her, head down a long wide hall and disappear behind a door on the right. She sniffed the wine, tasted it. It was perfect. Hit the palate just right with a spicy undertone. She lifted the bottle, read the label. Dessilani. She'd have to remember it. An enjoyable red wine that she imagined would go well with the spaghetti Mark was going to serve. Lifting her glass, she took herself on a tour.

Circling the kitchen, she noted the few dishes in the sink and the clean dishes in the dishwasher that hadn't yet been put away. The refrigerator was well-stocked. Milk, butter, eggs, meats, lunch-meat, cheese, veggies for salad in the crisper, some pudding cups, sour cream, cream cheese, beer, water, orange juice. Ice cream in the freezer along with pizza, frozen waffles and what she thought must be steaks wrapped in white butcher paper.

She approached the large sliding glass doors in the dining room and gazed out at the back lawn. She saw a table and chairs on a stamped concrete patio and a nicely landscaped yard that offered plenty of privacy from the neighbors. She spotted a small shed offering a protective cover to bicycles and a lawnmower. The largest item was a trampoline. She had to suppress a sudden urge to run outside and jump as high as she could. To just let go, turn her face up to the sky and fly.

Instead, she turned her glass up, went to refill it and continued her tour of Mark's home, learning more about the man whom, it seemed, had dedicated himself to rescuing her.

She went to the giant open cabinet in the living room and saw an old vinyl record collection and flipped through, hoping to learn more about this man. She strolled to the large front window and took note of a little girl playing in the yard just across the street. She wondered if Mark knew his neighbors or if his neighbors knew him or maybe of him.

Moving down the hall she peeked into the first room on the left. An office. Shelves lined with law books. A laptop on the desk. Several file folders stacked to one side. A picture of a large group of people whom she recognized as the Kino family.

"Sorry, I guess it's a little messy."

"Oh! Mark, you startled me. I guess you caught me being nosy."

He moved closer. "Be as nosy as you want. I have nothing to hide. I'm gonna go start dinner. I'm starved. But be forewarned, I have no idea what may jump out at you when you get to JoJo's room which is the next one down."

She smiled. "Sounds so alarmingly normal."

"Why would normal alarm you?"

"I have you and your entire family up on this very high pedestal. One false step and down you come."

"Sounds precarious. I don't think I like it." He reached for her glass. "Let me refill that for you."

She leaned close, smiled up at him. "That would be nice."

He didn't move. He was looking at her mouth. Bella knew he was thinking about kissing her again, and oh how she wanted him to do just that. She lifted her face toward him. He was freshly showered, his hair still damp. He smelled of soap and man and she wanted to lean close and breathe him in.

Mark drew a breath and stepped away. "I'll uh, be right back."

He left her. Bella smiled. She actually had him rattled. How long had it been since she'd been able to do that to a man? Not since she went away to be a freshman in college. Suddenly she felt powerful, and it was a delicious feeling.

He returned with the glass and offered it to her. "So, Miss Bella, it appears you've made quite a dent in the wine already. Better take this one slow," he said softly.

"Aye, aye, Captain," she answered.

"Why don't you come sit on the sofa while I cook? I'll put on some soft music and you can just relax."

"Sounds wonderful."

She let him pull her to the sofa. She sat and he scooped up her feet, placed them on a cushion, slipped off her shoes. He went to the large cabinet, hooked his phone up to something, smiled and turned to her.

"One of my favorites," he said.

She smiled. She'd thought he'd play some classical Beethoven or Bach. Instead one of John Coltrane's soft jazz numbers floated across the room, surrounding her in sensual emotion.

"Close your eyes, Bella, and let it take you," he commanded softly.

She did just that. She could still hear him in the kitchen. The soft banging of a pot being placed on the stove. Water running. Something being chopped on a cutting board. The simmer of meat and onion being browned. It smelled delicious. She felt delicious. She took a large sip of her wine and placed the glass down on the small table beside the sofa, then scooted farther down and snuggled into the soft cushions. Eyes shut, she relaxed, inhaled aromas, feasted on jazz. She didn't know how long she'd been lying there or what made her open her eyes, but when she did, he was leaning against the cabinet watching her.

She yawned and smiled at him. "Oh my goodness, how long have you been standing there?"

"Several minutes."

"Why are you just standing there? Is dinner ready?"

"Yes, I'm keeping it warm."

"Why?"

"Two reasons. One, you fell asleep."

She sat up, placed her feet back on the floor. "Oh, dear, I'm sorry. I guess it was the wine. How long have I been asleep?"

"About thirty minutes."

"Oh, Mark. I know you were hungry. Did you eat?"

He laughed. "I tasted. I'm fine." He moved forward and sat down beside her.

"So, you've been standing there watching me sleep?"

"I was. It was a beautiful thing. Seeing you, someone I care deeply for, safe, relaxed, snuggled up on my sofa, in my house. I like having you here, Bella. I like seeing you at peace."

He put his arm around her shoulders and gently pulled her close to him, so close that she had to place her hand on his chest in order to look up at his face.

"You said there were two reasons you waited dinner."

He placed a finger under her chin. "The second reason is, I was standing there contemplating stepping down off that pedestal."

"How?"

"By ignoring every logical reason there is for me not doing this."

He lowered his head and tasted her lips briefly, looked deeply into her eyes. "I know all the arguments. I've been reciting them in my head for the past hour. And yet, all I want to do is take you in my arms, and make you mine in every way. I don't know if I'm strong enough to resist. So, you have to help me, Bella."

"Sorry, Mark, I can't help you. When you touch me, I'm lost. I want you to kiss me again. I don't want you to stop. You make me feel things I thought I'd never feel again in my life. You make me feel alive when for the past several years I've felt nothing but dead. I'm elated that suddenly, after feeling so attracted to you since the first day I met you two years ago, you suddenly seem to reciprocate those feelings. I want you, Mark. I need you. I need you to make me feel like a woman again."

"Oh, Bella," he groaned softly. Gently, he raised her chin and slowly kissed her mouth.

She gave a soft moan in the back of her throat. He kissed her over and over, taking a few seconds here and there to murmur soft words into her ear. "You're so beautiful. So very beautiful," he whispered. "You taste so good." He pressed her into the cushions until she lay flat on her back. She gasped. And that brought him out of it.

"Mark," she murmured, "don't stop. Please don't stop."

Mark closed his eyes in defense. "Please, Jesus, help me," he pleaded silently.

"Mark, please," she begged.

Gratefully, words flowed into his brain. Mark smiled because Jesus once again filled him with his spirit. "Bella, one of these days I'm gonna make you mine. Count on it. One thing you have to know, I mean, you need to be confident about, is that I will always be in control of myself and my emotions. I have to prove that right now. I am a Christian man. I don't do adultery. I don't do sex outside of marriage. I have to show you that I will not disrespect you. I brought you here to my home because I wanted to spend time with you. I realize now that I shouldn't have. I'm putting us both in a precarious situation. It's just that I couldn't resist taking advantage of the circumstances with Gordon being away. I couldn't resist, Bella, because—I'm falling in love with you."

She drew in a sharp breath. "You are?"

"I am. And real love, true love is not giving in to carnal urges like

some animal that can't control itself. My love for you will be in a much higher realm. Does that make sense?"

He looked into her eyes. Tears ran down her face. "Bella? Oh, Bella, I'm sorry."

She gave a soft laugh. "Please don't say that. I'm not."

"But you're crying."

"I know. I'm not sure why. Maybe because it's been so long. So long since I've felt like this, since someone talked about..."

"About what? Loving you?"

She closed her eyes. "Yes."

He leaned down and kissed her forehead then gently rubbed his cheek over hers. Her words spoke volumes to what she'd been through over the past years. The pain, both physical and emotional.

"Mark?"

He smiled down at her. "Yes?"

"Please tell me we're not done."

"Oh, we're not done, not by a long shot. Just be patient, okay?"

She nodded. "So, I have a question for you."

He sat up straight, turned slightly on the sofa so he could see her face. "Okay, shoot."

"You said, you're a Christian man, you don't do sex. I'm not trying to be argumentative or judgmental, but tell me about JoJo."

He frowned and nodded. "It's a fair question and it's a long story, so for now, I'll give the *CliffsNotes* version. It was my eighteenth birthday. I was gonna take my girlfriend to a hotel and she was gonna give me a present, if you know what I mean. Yes, I'd made the decision to willfully sin. I'd been cautioned by Eric and Ricky, but allowed my free will. On the other hand, I'd been encouraged to do it by my father. I think my mother would've tried to talk some sense into me, but she was dealing with some issues with Eric, which is another long story. Anyway, my girlfriend changed her mind, so I came home in a bad mood. We had a houseguest at the time, a girl we thought was a homeless girl. My mom took her in off the streets.

"Beth, that's her name, she came to my room after I got home and, well, gave me my present after all. Shortly thereafter, she was thrown out of the house for trying to hurt our family. As it turned out she'd been hired by an old enemy of Eric's to do us harm. It also turned out that she was as much a victim as the rest of us. I didn't know that she

was pregnant until Beth's mom showed up at our door with the baby right before I was supposed to leave for college. She was there to give the baby to us, to our family to be raised."

"Beth didn't want her baby?" Bella asked.

"Beth died of cancer shortly after he was born."

"Oh, Mark, I'm so sorry."

He nodded. "Beth named the baby Joseph, after her own father. But anyway, you can see, there are always consequences for breaking God's laws. Those laws are not there to restrict us, but rather to protect us."

"Are you saying Beth died because she broke God's laws?"

"Oh! No, I didn't mean that. Beth was sick before I met her. She was terminal. But I ended up having a child I wasn't ready for. I missed out on the first part of his life. Though it was wrong for me to do what I did with her, she actually took comfort from that and the pregnancy gave her something to focus on other than her pain and her own impending death. So, I never think that JoJo was a mistake. He was meant to be. He brought his mother comfort, he brings me joy every day. He is a light to this world and I love him with every bit of my soul."

Bella nodded. "Well, he certainly has been a light for Logan."

"That's good to hear. I've tried to continue raising him the way my mom and Eric began raising him. We pray together every morning and night. He's active in church. We talk a lot about God." He stopped when he saw her frown.

"Wait, back up a minute," she said. "You didn't start out raising your son?"

He sighed deeply. "When Beth's mom brought JoJo, I was literally headed to college that same day on a football scholarship. My mother and Eric convinced me that me going to school and making something of myself would be the best thing I could do for JoJo. They stepped in and took care of him, taught him, brought him to visit me often, and obviously they did a great job. Hard shoes to fill, but I try."

"How long were you in school?"

"I played football for four years. Got hurt my senior year. People say I was crushed because I was gonna go pro, but I actually wasn't thinking along those lines. I knew I was gonna study law. Once football was over, I came home to be with my son. I was twenty-three. It took

me a little longer to make it through law school because I wanted to work and pay my way as much as possible. But I finally made it. Passed the bar, bought this house."

"I'm so impressed with all you've accomplished. I mean, all that and you're also a martial arts master."

He smiled. "Thanks. But really, I've had big-time resources and for that I'm extremely grateful."

She reached out, took his hand. "You are a humble and amazing man and an awesome father."

His heart beat a little faster. He was in love with her and hoped she was feeling the same way toward him. "And I've watched you with Logan. With everything you face, you're an amazing mother. Have you ever thought about having another child?"

She looked down, shrugged. "Gordon didn't like worrying that I might get pregnant. He didn't want any more children after Logan and so he forced me to get my tubes tied."

Oops. He hadn't meant that, he'd been talking about her mothering JoJo. However, the information registered in Mark's brain. The woman he was in love with couldn't have children. He felt a moment of sharp pain in the vicinity of his heart and then pushed it aside. If he felt that way, how must she feel? He smiled kindly at her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It doesn't matter, Bella. It's you I want and I was talking about JoJo, anyway. I was thinking along the lines of, if you and I were to get together and you being a mother to my son."

"Oh, well, I guess I put my foot in my mouth."

"No, you brought up something that needs to be talked about." He sighed. The cruelties and humiliation Bella had been subjected to over the years were becoming more and more clear. He reached up and stroked her hair.

She sighed. "I guess this conversation has cooled off any feelings or intentions you may have had."

"Oh, Bella," he murmured as he took her in his arms. He used his finger under her chin to raise her head. "There's nothing that could change the way I feel about you. And it was me who put on the brakes, because I want to show you real love and real care the right way. God's way." Because he truly did love her. And the man she was married to was no more than a corrupt prison guard who had his way with the

inmate whenever he pleased.

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Logan jumped as high as he could on the trampoline, counted to three, pulled his knees in toward his chest and flipped over, then kicked out near the end. He came down and his feet hit the trampoline. He jumped and hollered. "Yes!"

"You did it!" Eric yelled.

Logan came to a stop, grinning from ear to ear. "That was too cool. I didn't think I was gonna make it, but it just sort of happened."

"You're a fast learner," JoJo offered. "My turn."

Logan came to the edge and hopped down and JoJo jumped on. He began bouncing high, way higher than Logan had gone. Logan's eyes grew wide as JoJo flipped, came down, did some sort of twisting thing, came down, flipped again, came down, flipped the other way and finally slowed to a stop.

"That was awesome," Logan said.

"Not really. You should see Eric do his stuff. He's the master."

Eric frowned. "I can't do anything for two months. Nothing that could possibly rattle my brain, the doctor says."

Logan nodded. "That makes sense. Does it still hurt?"

Eric shook his head. "No, but I have headaches sometimes."

JoJo was sitting cross-legged on the trampoline and Eric jumped on and sat next to him. Logan climbed on, smiling as he looked around him. He was sitting on a trampoline at night, with the house of famous movie stars to his left and the Pacific Ocean to his right and his two closest friends, no, brothers, sitting with him.

Something had happened to the three of them today up in the canyon on that cliff side. Logan felt it. At this moment in time, everything seemed so right. And at this moment, it was.

Eric stretched out on his back, looked up at the stars, so Logan and JoJo followed.

"I love the stars," Logan said.

"Me too," JoJo agreed.

"Yeah, me too. Sometimes they make me feel like I can fly away," Eric put in.

"Yeah," Logan said with a smile. "Wouldn't that be awesome."

"I thought maybe I'd like to be a pilot, like in the military," Eric said. "But then again, I was thinking it would be totally cool to look

into the space program."

"Totally cool," Logan said. "What about you, JoJo, do you know what you want to be?"

"I have too many things. Dad tells me to start trying some of them so that I can try to narrow it down."

"What kind of things?" Logan asked.

"I want to be a doctor and help people, you know, but I also want to play football and if I go for that I have to give it my all too. Another thing is I'd like to one day fight in the Kino challenge and maybe run my own dojo and I'd like to do stunts for some movies."

"Yeah, me too," Eric said.

"Yeah, that would be great," Logan said.

"What do you wanna be, Logan?" JoJo asked.

Logan shrugged. "I haven't really thought about it. I'm good in school, like, I have straight A's and I like science and math."

"Maybe you should talk to your..." JoJo stopped himself. Everyone knew what he'd been about to say, but they let it go. It made JoJo realize just how bad Logan had it. "Maybe you could talk to *my* dad," he offered. "He's pretty good about helping me sort out thoughts and stuff."

"Yeah, I might do that," Logan said softly. "And JoJo, it's okay, I mean, what you were about to say. You're right, I can't talk to my dad about anything. Mostly because I don't care about his opinion on anything. So, I probably *will* talk to Master Mark. I mean, I might as well, we're like brothers now, right?"

"Wrong," Eric said. "We're not *like* brothers. We *are* brothers. And you can talk to my dad too, and we can all talk to Granddad, because he knows the most about everything."

"You mean, Grandmaster Kino?"

"Yeah. He's the best."

"So, don't worry about what you're gonna be and stuff, Logan, cuz we're your family now and we got your back."

Logan smiled up at the stars, feeling happy and content. "Cool."

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Joey was feeling pretty content. The night air was cool and crisp, the engine of his Ferrari purred sweetly, and a beautiful, black-haired, blue-eyed woman sat in the passenger seat.

He glanced at her. She was slouched way down in the seat, her

shoes were off and her feet propped up on the dash. The way she lounged, her dress had moved up, way up, and he couldn't keep his eyes from roaming up her leg to where a sliver of black lace peeked out. Her eyes were closed and she was humming to the radio.

Breez opened her eyes and smiled at Joey. "Well, Joey, I have to say, I really liked the *Bayside Grill."*

Joey chuckled. "I think the *Bayside Grill* really liked you too. I've never seen anyone down that much tequila."

She smiled contentedly. "Are you saying I'm drunk?"

"That would be my best guess."

She giggled. "Well, I admit, I have a little buzz going, but really, I'm not drunk. I'm one of those girls who can out-party most frat boys any day– or night."

"Why does that not surprise me."

Breez giggled and closed her eyes again, smiling.

"What are you thinking about?" Joey asked.

She twirled a finger in her hair. "I'm thinking about how you probably make love."

He swallowed hard. "And how do you think I probably make love?"

"Different."

He frowned. "Different from whom?"

"Not from anyone. I mean different each time. You'll keep surprising me. I was wondering how you'd make love to me tonight."

"Maybe I wasn't going to. Maybe I intended to put your cute little drunk self to bed and watch you sleep."

She giggled. "Oh, well, again, that would also have been a surprise." She snuggled down into the seat. "How sweet," she said as she imagined what he'd described. She sighed. "Tell me, Joseph Adams, why do all guys that drive fancy sports cars drive them so slow?"

He grinned. "Because we can. We don't have to prove their speed to anyone. Why? Would you like me to drive faster?"

"Yes, I really would."

"You're in that much of a hurry to get home?"

She frowned. "Not home. I want some dessert. I have this terrible craving for some pie." She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it."

"You want pie."

"Yes."

"Any particular kind of pie?"

"I like all pie."

"Fruit pie or cream pie?"

"Doesn't matter."

He shrugged. "Okay."

She shrieked as he gunned the engine, whipped a U-turn and raced back up the boulevard.

Joey smiled at her. She was sitting up now, eyes wide as he drove like a maniac, happy to give her a thrill and hoping when a cop pulled him over it was someone he knew.

✞✞✞

Psalm 37:4

"Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Chapter Nine

Joey whipped a few more turns, skidding on pavement, which evoked a huge gasp from Breez. He flew down two more blocks, turned sharply and stopped abruptly in a parking space in front of an adorable all-night diner.

Breez sat up, glared angrily at Joey. "You could've killed us back there," she complained.

Joey laughed. "Not hardly. I thought you wanted me to drive fast."

"I did, but you could've warned me."

"You just like to fight, don't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He smiled. Waited.

Finally, she smiled back. "Maybe I do."

"Do what? Like to fight?"

"With you I do."

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said as he got out of the car. He went around to open the door for her and this time she let him, more than likely, he mused, due to her inebriated condition.

He opened her door, knelt down beside her and helped her to get her shoes back on, then pulled her to her feet. She smiled up at him, put her arms around his neck as she stumbled forward. Joey's hands moved to her waist. "Steady now," he said softly. "Are you sure you can walk?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, I can walk. I told you I'm not drunk."

He smiled down at her. "Okay. Well, then let's..."

She raised up and kissed him.

He reciprocated. She was compliant and warm and sweet.

"I want you," she whispered.

Joey pulled away slightly, kissed her upper lip briefly and smiled at her. "So, you wanna forget about the pie?"

Her eyes opened wide as if she'd just remembered. "The pie? Oh! No, of course I don't want to forget the pie."

She stepped away, tugged on his hand. "Come on, I'm starving."

Shaking his head, Joey pointed his remote at the car, locked it, took Breez by the hand and escorted her into the diner.

Inside was like stepping through time into the 1950s. Yellow vinyl stools stood next to white and black Formica counters that ran the length of the place. Along the outer walls and in front of the windows sat red vinyl booths with the same Formica-covered tables. A jukebox stood on the back wall in a corner. A lone waitress looked up from filling stainless steel napkin holders and nodded her head. "I'll be with you in a minute."

Joey smiled politely and escorted Breez to a booth, noting the young couple huddled closely together three booths down and a man in a janitor's uniform drinking coffee at the counter.

The waitress, a woman in her mid-fifties with salt-and-pepper gray hair and faded lipstick, brought silverware as Joey picked up one of the plastic-enclosed menus.

"Need a minute?" the waitress asked.

Joey put the menu down. "Actually, we're just looking for some pie. Do you have pie?"

"Apple, pecan and chocolate cream," she rattled off.

Joey turned to look at Breez who was wrinkling her cute little nose as she tried to decide.

"Pecan," she finally said with a nod of her head.

"Coffee?" the woman asked.

"No, I would like to have a big ol' glass of milk, *aannd* a glass of ice to go with it," Breez said.

"You want anything?" the waitress asked, directing her attention toward Joey.

"I'll just have a glass of water," Joey said.

The woman frowned. He shrugged. "Somebody has to drive."

She walked away, apparently not appreciating his sense of humor.

Minutes later, Joey watched Breez, delighting in her alcohol-induced pleasure of eating pecan pie and drinking ice-cold milk. Her eyes closed as she chewed. She was making sounds that took Joey to another world. A forbidden world at this point in time. He glanced around, wondering if anyone was about to "have what she's having."

Her eyes opened and she poured more of her milk over the ice in the second glass, took a big gulp and set it down. Looking up, she

smiled at him. “What?” she asked.

Before he answered, he made note of a woman crossing the street and heading across the parking lot toward the diner. “Why don’t you just order your milk over ice to begin with?”

“Because the longer the milk and ice are together, the more watered down the milk gets, so I pour just enough over the ice to last a few swallows.”

He smiled at her. “You’re adorable, you know that?”

She licked her lips. “You really think so?”

“Yeah, I do.” He stopped and looked up as the woman who’d been crossing the street came into the diner. The fresh bruise on her face was immediately noticeable, along with the swollen lip. He sighed and wondered if the whole world had gone crazy.

“What are you frowning at?” Breez asked, eyeing the woman’s back as she passed. “Are you making eyes at another woman?”

Joey put a finger to his lips. “I’m not stupid, Breez.” He nodded in the woman’s direction. “Looks like she’s having a bad night.”

Breez studied the woman. She wore gray sweatpants, dirty white tennis shoes, a black t-shirt and a faded red sweater. Breez couldn’t see her face, but she thought she might be young because her blond hair was long and back in a ponytail.

“Excuse me,” the woman said to the waitress. “Is it possible that I might use the phone?”

The waitress frowned and shook her head. “Sorry, can’t let anyone use it. It’s a business phone.”

“It’s just that, well, I just need to use it for a second. I need to call a friend for a ride. I’m sort of stranded.”

The waitress shook her head. “You’ll have to look somewhere else.”

The woman turned to look out the windows to the parking lot and Breez got her first real look. Breez’s audible gasp caught the woman’s attention and she looked down quickly and pulled her sweater tighter around her, as if that would hide the markings on her face.

Breez collected herself quickly though and smiled at the woman. “You can use my phone,” she offered.

“Oh, thank you,” the woman said quickly and approached the table.

Joey frowned. The woman’s voice sounded relieved, but her eyes

shone with fear. He sat up straighter, and began scanning the parking lot and the streets beyond.

"Please, sit down a minute," Breez said softly as she moved over and handed her cell phone to the woman.

The woman sat on the very edge of the seat and punched in a number on the phone, her eyes searching out the window briefly before she closed them and muttered, "Please answer, please answer."

Breez looked over at Joey and followed his gaze out into the parking lot. "Did you see something?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, but we probably will."

"Oh, Linda, thank God you answered."

Breez listened as the woman spoke.

"I know it's late, but I, uh, I need you to come and get me. I know, I realize that, but I have no one else I can call. Well, I'd rather wait the two hours it takes for you to get here than to go back there. I can't, Linda. It's bad this time. I don't know what he's thinking anymore. I don't know what he'll do."

The woman's eyes met Breez's and she quickly looked down, lowered her voice.

"Last time you asked me why I didn't call you. This time you act like you wish I hadn't called. No. No. I tell ya what, just never mind. Just go back to your perfect little life and don't worry about me. No, you're absolutely right. I made my bed, yeah, yeah, whatever. Sorry to wake you." She ended the call, handed the phone back to Breez. "Uh, thanks," she mumbled.

"We can give you a ride," Breez offered.

The woman didn't respond, only looked from Breez to Joey and back again.

"Do you have somewhere you can go?" Joey asked.

She looked down. "Not really. You see, my husband, well, I've left him, and my best friend, Linda, uh, she can't help me out right now. You see she has two kids and she says he'll come looking for me there."

"Actually, she's right," Joey said.

Breez raised her eyebrows in surprise. She'd been thinking how selfish this Linda person was for refusing to rescue a friend.

Joey glanced at the woman before he turned to Breez to explain. "I surmise from what, excuse me, what's your name," he asked the

woman.

"Mia. Mia Higgins."

"From what Mia said, I suppose her husband is the one who did the damage to her face and an angry spouse is very unpredictable and can end up committing some pretty heinous acts. There's no reason to put her friend's family in any danger."

"Then what do you suggest? Are you suggesting a shelter of some kind?" Breez asked Joey.

"Look, I appreciate you letting me use your phone but I don't want to be any trouble. I have a brother who lives in Nevada. Maybe I can give him a call."

"A brother? That would be better," Breez said kindly, glancing at Joey for approval. He nodded thoughtfully.

"It's just that," Mia continued, "last time I saw him he told me that I'm nothing but trouble and don't come back until I get myself straightened out."

Joey cocked his head and raised his brows. "Straightened out? Are you using?" Joey asked.

"No, I mean, not drugs. I was drinking pretty heavily at the time. But not anymore, I swear."

"Oh, poor thing," Breez complained. "Joey, we have to do something to help her."

Joey nodded. "We have to figure out a place she can go to be safe until I have a chance to speak with her husband."

"No! No you can't. He'll, he's, I mean, he's very big and..."

"He's a coward with issues. Any man who hits on a woman is nothing more than a coward."

"Where can she go, Joey? I mean, are you speaking about a shelter?" Breez asked.

"Yes and no. I know the perfect place she can stay until we get this worked out."

Before Breez could ask another question, Joey looked Mia over. "Have you told me the truth?"

Mia frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Your name is Mia Higgins? You're clean. Do you have any children?"

"No, but..."

"The bruises on your face, your husband did that tonight?"

"Yes," she muttered.

"If I get you some help, will you accept it?" Joey asked.

"I," she stopped, looked back and forth between Breez and Joey. "I don't even know who you are."

"Of course," Breez said, patting Mia's hand. "We could be some weird perverts." She rifled through her purse, pulled out her ID and placed it on the table in front of Mia. "I'm Breez Sheridan. Guess that doesn't really tell you anything." She motioned toward Joey. "But you might recognize Joey Adams. He's been in a few movies with Ricky Kino. He's Ricky's step-brother. He fights in the Kino Challenges."

The woman really looked at Joey for the first time, her eyes registering recognition.

Joey sighed and pulled out his security badge. "I'm an agent for Ameritech Security."

"Ameritech? They like, supply bodyguards for celebrities, right?"

"That's one of our many functions."

"Are you suggesting that you would help protect me?"

Joey shook his head. "No offense, but you couldn't afford me. Anyway, I have someone much better than me in mind."

"Who?" Breez and Mia asked at the same time.

"My boss' wife. Her name is Angel Lee. Angel runs self-defense schools and shelters for victims of domestic violence all across the country. You may have heard of the *Angel Foundation Network*."

"So, this Angel, she has a place for me to stay?"

"Yes. I can get her on the phone right now, but you have to tell me that you're willing to help yourself. That you're willing to get out of the situation you're in and you're not gonna go running back to your husband in a few days or a few weeks. Statistics show that he's not gonna change, so that means you have to be strong and do what it takes to get yourself out. Angel will help you. There are funds set aside, counselors to help, along with a network of women who are going through the same thing you are." He stopped and smiled kindly. "So? Do you think you can do this?"

She nodded. "I would've left sooner if I thought he'd let me. You don't know him. He's persistent. I'm still afraid he'll find me."

"Trust me. He won't find you. Not in Angel's organization. She's married to the owner of the world's top security agency."

Joey touched a few buttons on his phone and placed it to his ear.

"Angel? Yes, this is Joey... no, it's you I want to talk to... I got a project for you, her name is Mia Higgins... actually, she's sitting with me and my date at a diner on North Harbor Drive... yes... yes... face is pretty beat up, has nowhere to go, she's scared... got it... got it... will do... on my way... thanks."

Joey closed the phone and smiled at Mia. "So, I'm supposed to take you straight to Angel's house for now. You'll stay there tonight and she'll take it from there."

Mia nodded. "Thank you. But, what about my job?"

"I don't know about the particulars. Angel will work with you to get your life back on track. She'll have the answers to your questions. I can tell you this; if your husband is like you say he is, you show up at your job tomorrow, you or someone else could end up dead. Do you want to take that chance?"

She shook her head as the trauma of the night finally caught up with her and tears began to fall.

"Oh, poor dear. It's gonna be okay, Mia," Breez said. "Please, let Angel help you. You deserve so much more than being knocked around like some punching bag."

Mia nodded.

"Let's go," Joey said firmly.

He slapped a twenty on the table. The trio rose and started to leave but Breez turned back and addressed the waitress.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," she said, her voice hitching with emotion. "There are times when us girls need to stick together, ya know? I mean, us women. I know you could see that someone had beat up on her. She only asked to use the phone. What if it had been your sister, or your daughter? Shame on you. Shame." She turned and walked toward the door.

Joey looked at the ashen-faced waitress and then at the gorgeous face of the woman walking toward him, glowing with righteous indignation. He smiled at her as she approached, his heart tumbling with admiration and love. "Thatta girl," he mumbled as he put his arm around her and they walked out the door.

Joey scanned the lot and walked toward the car. Breez walked slower, staying beside Mia. "You okay?" she asked when Mia stopped.

Mia's eyes opened wide, her fear palpable. "Oh no," she cried. Before Breez knew what was happening, Mia took off running toward

the east side of the parking lot. There was nothing on that side except an open lot and then a line of trees.

"No," Joey yelled as he started running.

Breez turned to see a large, late-model pickup come screeching from the gas station across the street, barreling through the diner parking lot, headed straight for Mia.

"No!" Breez screamed.

The truck barely missed Mia, but stopped in front of her, cutting her off from the empty lot she'd been heading for. Mia turned and headed back toward Breez.

Breez looked past Mia to see a huge man spring from the truck and run toward them. It was Joey's voice that got her moving.

"Get her back in the diner, and call 911," Joey yelled at Breez.

Breez obeyed immediately, grabbing Mia's hand. "Come on," she yelled and jerked her arm. The two women ran inside. "Call 911," Breez immediately commanded of the waitress who was already on the phone. The woman nodded.

Breez and Mia turned to watch. Breez gasped when she saw just how huge Mia's husband was. "Geez, he's a giant," Breez exclaimed.

"He'll kill him," Mia said softly as if she were already mourning Joey's death.

From what Joey could tell, the man was unarmed. Joey held up his hands. "Stop right there, buddy."

The man stopped and actually smiled. "You think you can keep me away from my wife?"

Joey nodded solemnly. "Yes, I do."

The man nodded. "Bring it on you little pipsqueak."

"No, I'd rather not," Joey said. "We've called the police so you may as well just have a seat right here on the curb and we'll wait for them."

The man's eyes blazed with rage. "That witch called the police on me?" He moved forward. "I'll give her a reason," he muttered as he moved toward Joey.

Breez watched through the window, her hand over her mouth. It was like something out of one of those Bourne movies. Joey moved so fast she could hardly tell what was happening. Joey spun; his hands, feet and elbows moved so fast they were a blur. Next thing she knew, Joey was leaning over Mia's husband who lay flat on his back in the

middle of the parking lot. It was about that time that the police came screeching into the lot and jumped from their cars, their weapons drawn.

Joey immediately put his hands in the air. Breez watched as the police moved toward Joey, directed him onto his knees, then onto his stomach. They moved fast then, ran forward and cuffed him. Mia and Breez ran out the door.

"He's the one," Mia yelled, pointing at her husband. "He's the one who did this to me. He was gonna kill me. That guy, that's Joey Adams. He helped me. He got in between us."

It took almost thirty minutes and a call to Jason Lee at Ameritech Security before Joey and Breez had been allowed to leave with Mia in tow. When they pulled up to Jason's house, Mia couldn't stop exclaiming.

The place was impressive, Joey admitted, eyeing the two-story, white marble mansion enclosed in high-tech security gates and lit up on all sides. Joey and Breez escorted Mia to the door. They were met by Jason and Angel.

"Ms. Sheridan," Jason said, nodding at Breez.

"Mr. Lee," Breez returned, smiling sweetly.

"Come in," Jason said as he stepped back.

Breez nodded at a tall, slender woman with a warm smile and blond hair that was cut in a sleek bob.

"This is my wife, Angel," Jason said.

Breez smiled, extended her hand. "Hi, I'm Breez."

"Hey," Angel said kindly and then reached out toward Mia. "You must be Mia. Please, come in," Angel said, her sweet southern accent noticeable. "I know things seem pretty bleak right now, but believe me when I say, everything is gonna be okay."

Mia smiled. "Thank you."

"Well, we won't keep you," Joey said.

Mia turned, hugged him. "Thank you so much." She broke away and hugged Breez. "You're so kind. Thank you."

Breez brushed a wisp of hair from Mia's face. "I'm glad we were there to help. You be strong." She looked up at Angel. "I have a feeling we're leaving you in great hands."

"An understatement," Jason said with pride.

A few minutes later Joey and Breez were back in the car, headed

toward Breez's house.

Breez watched Joey drive as the night's events ran through her mind. "You were amazing out there," she said.

Joey glanced at her. "Gimme a break."

"No, I mean it. He was so big, I was actually worried about you, but you were so, I don't know, so confident."

Joey laughed. "That's what I've been trying to tell you."

Breez smiled. "I still think you're cocky, but I guess when one can do what you can do, one has a right to be cocky."

"Confident," he corrected.

She didn't argue. "Isn't it weird that your boss' wife runs a national women's shelter? I mean, neither you nor Mr. Lee mentioned that to me this whole time."

Joey grinned. "That's because you can afford me."

Joey pulled up in front of the house, turned off the engine, jumped from the car, opened Breez's door, helped her out. She stumbled and he caught her and picked her up in his arms.

"You were pretty amazing yourself tonight," he said as he walked up the steps to her front door.

"How so?" she asked as she fumbled in her purse, fished out her keys and handed them to him.

He grunted as he handled unlocking the door without putting her down. "You jumped right in to help poor Mia. You told off that waitress like a pro and you got Mia safely inside the diner when I told you to, without any arguing. What's up with that?"

She shrugged. "Well, I guess it was because I knew, at the moment, that you were the professional, so I did what you said. Believe me, it won't be a recurring event."

Joey chuckled as he stepped inside and used his foot to close the door. "Now *that* I believe," he said as he turned the deadbolt.

He moved up the steps.

"You know, I didn't get to finish my pie."

He lowered his head, brushed his lips against her cheek. "You're kidding. Are you really hungry?"

"For something, yes."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she said coyly. "The way those cops manhandled you when they pulled up and cuffed you, you looked so vulnerable. It

was a real turn-on."

Joey rolled his eyes. "You like it when I'm vulnerable?"

"I think I do," she said as he placed her on her bed.

He stepped back from her, looked her over as she lay on her bed. "Well, then you must really like me at this moment because I'm about as vulnerable right now as I have ever been."

She smiled. "I love it."

"Yeah, well, I don't. Good night, Breez."

"Sleep with me, Joey."

He shook his head. "Not time."

"You said you'd stay here tonight."

"I'll be here. Go to sleep." He turned and left the room.

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"Good morning, bro," Ricky said cheerfully into his phone.

"It is indeed," Mark responded as he eyed the woman asleep on his pillow. "What are you up to?"

"Me, Taylor and the boys are cooking breakfast for Bree. Why? You in a rush to get JoJo home?"

"No, actually just called to tell you that when you drop off JoJo here, go ahead and drop Logan off too."

"Oh, okay." He paused. "Oh– well, I see. So, the world would have me say, 'good for you,' but I'm not so sure about that."

Mark sighed. "It's not what it sounds like. She slept in my bed. I stayed on the couch."

"Still playing with fire, Mark."

"Yep, God made me aware of that last night, which is why I slept on the couch and she slept in my room."

"Well then, I won't say anything else."

"I appreciate that."

"Okay then," Ricky said. "We'll see you about ten."

"Two hours. That sounds good." Mark ended the call and placed his phone on the bedside table before he lay down in his bed and moved up close behind Bella. She sighed.

It didn't take long before she moaned and turned over to face him. "Mark?" she said softly.

"You expecting someone else?"

She sighed. "Just wanted to make sure I wasn't dreaming all this."

"No, you're not dreaming. What we're sharing is very real."

She stared at the chest of drawers that was in her line of vision. "Is it, Mark? I mean, I have to go home soon, and I want to believe that all this, you and me, it's not just a, well, I mean..."

"Not just a casual fling? No, Bella. This is real. Last night, I told you I was falling in love with you and that was wrong. If you remember, I changed it, because I realized, I'm not falling. I fell. And it's something that can't be changed. I have no choice in the matter. It has to be you. So, this is not just some fling. If I wanted to just find someone to have a casual relationship with, it wouldn't be someone who was in such a precarious position, no offense."

"None taken," she whispered.

"Listen carefully to me, Bella, because what I'm about to say is important. I'm in love with you. You are sweet and kind and beautiful and strong, intelligent, compassionate and I'm sorry to be complicating your life, but I have to tell you– I want you. I want you here, beside me in my bed yes, but I mean, here, with me, in my life. I want you out of the dangerous situation you and Logan live in. I want to take you away from that pig of a man who thinks it's okay to use his fists on you. I want you, Bella, more than I can say."

They were silent then. There was no room for talking. Bella closed her eyes, pretending she was his. Only feeling, only experiencing warmth, safety, love. She realized she was crying again. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she didn't feel sad. She felt amazingly light and happy. So much had changed over the past few weeks, and so much was about to change, she thought. Mr. Lee and Joey said one more week of gathering evidence. One more week and they would have enough to file for divorce and win temporary custody of Logan. After that the chances would be good to get full custody.

She knew her son wanted nothing to do with his father and she knew he would tell a judge that in a second. She didn't know what it was, but suddenly, she felt hopeful. She felt almost powerful. She felt stronger than she'd ever felt, and she realized it was Mark's love that was giving her this sudden strength. She didn't feel scared to go back to her house today and wait for Gordon. She felt ready. She would hold her head high because she is not pathetic. She is beautiful and smart—and loved.

She moved suddenly, placed her hands on Mark's chest and kissed his mouth. She couldn't hold in the sudden joy. She smiled at him. "I

love you, Mark."

"Well now, that's..."

She placed her hand over his mouth. "No, don't say anything. I love you. You're an amazing man, an amazing person and I feel amazingly good whenever I'm around you. There's so much about you I love that it will take me eons to say it all, so, just believe me when I say, I love you, Mark Adams."

"Okay."

"And I'm gonna go make you the most delicious breakfast you've ever had." She rose and looked around the room to find her shoes.

Mark watched her. When she turned and smiled, he spoke. "Bella, you are beautiful," he murmured.

She offered him a brilliant smile just before she stepped into the bathroom. He heard the shower come on and pictured her lathering her skin. He could hear her humming and he leaned back against the headboard and smiled. What a night it had been. He didn't want it to be over. They'd eaten and then talked into the wee hours of the morning. When she'd finally fallen asleep he'd carried her into his bed, pulled up the covers, kissed her cheek and left her.

He'd told her he loved her, and now, she'd told him the same thing. He sincerely hoped he hadn't jumped the gun, spoken too soon. Oh, he was sure he loved her. Still, did he screw everything up by telling her? No, he couldn't have regrets now. What's done is done and loving her could never be a mistake.

Mark's mind fast-forwarded to the life they would have together. Bella and him and JoJo and Logan and...he frowned. He definitely had always planned on having more children with the woman he married. It was just another obstacle to overcome, but he would do some research or better yet, ask his sister. Jeffy would certainly have the scoop on that. He was sure there would be ways around it. He was pretty sure a tubal ligation could be undone.

The bathroom door opened and she walked out, completely dressed, a towel wrapped around her head.

"I hope you don't mind, I used your shampoo."

"I don't mind if you don't."

"I was just thinking in the shower. Will you call the Kinos and ask them to drop Logan off here instead of at my house?"

"I already did that."

"You did? Well, okay then!" She smiled, pulled the towel off her hair, ran her fingers through it. "I have to get my brush from my purse," she said more to herself than to him. She flashed another bright smile, pointed at Mark. "I'll see you in the kitchen. Breakfast in thirty minutes."

"Sounds good."

He smiled as she ran forward, kissed him hard with a loud smack, turned and ran out the bedroom door.

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"Second breakfast," JoJo said with a chuckle. "When your mom asked if we were hungry because we'd already had breakfast at Uncle Ricky's house and you quoted that line from *Lord of the Rings*, I knew for sure that you were my brother."

"Why?" Logan asked as they leaned against the trampoline out in JoJo's backyard.

"Cuz, everyone in our family is always quoting lines from movies. Dad says it was a game he's played since he was a kid. You know like, 'Do or do not, there is no try.' You know that one don't you?"

"Yoda said it. Who wouldn't know that one?"

"Exactly. Okay, how about this one. 'You almost had me? You never had me - you never had your car.'"

Logan smiled. "*Fast and Furious*. Too easy."

JoJo thought hard. "Here's one. 'Yeah, that's right! We're super heroes! You love us!'"

Logan frowned, chewed his lip and then remembered. "*Kick Ass*. It was a pretty cool movie, but Mom says it had too much foul language. I told her, well, duh, look at the title."

"Did she get mad at you for smartin' off to her?"

"Naw, she just laughed. She knew I was right. I don't smart off to her, anyway, so she knew that wasn't how I meant it. Okay, so, I got one, it's easy but it has to be said. 'Be kinda hot if I won this thing, huh, Mr. Han?'"

"'Be kinda hot if you focused,'" JoJo continued with the quote.

Logan nodded his head with a smile. "'Yeah, well, after that,'" he finished.

"*Karate Kid*," they said together.

"That was an awesome movie," Logan said.

"I got to go to the premiere. Uncle Ricky, ya know, he's friends

with Jackie Chan."

"Wow, that's so cool."

"Yeah." JoJo jumped onto the side of the tramp. "Man, your mom is a good cook," he said as he stretched out on the trampoline and stared up at the bright blue sky.

Logan leaned over the side of the tramp, rested his head in his hands. "Yeah, she is. I guess I'm used to it. Guess I need to say 'thank you' more like you and your dad just did for like, a million times."

JoJo laughed. "Always good to be grateful, Granddad always says. Anyway, so, are you thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

Logan climbed onto the trampoline and lay down beside JoJo. "I dunno. What are you thinkin'?"

"I'm thinkin' it's happening. I mean, my dad, your mom. Just like we were hoping. I mean, I think your mom spent the night with my dad last night."

Logan was pretty sure of the same thing and he tried to think hard about what that might mean. He hoped his father didn't find out about it or he'd probably kill her. He hoped his mom didn't tell his dad. No, she wouldn't do that. "I think so too," Logan finally said. "I hope that means that your dad is gonna, like, rescue my mom."

"I hope so too. I mean, I know he wants to and when my dad puts his mind to something, he does it." He sat up, nudged Logan. "Look."

Logan sat up quickly, followed JoJo's line of vision to the kitchen window. Master Mark was kissing his mom. Logan's heart filled with joy and hope. He grinned. "Cool."

"Yeah, totally," JoJo said. "So, when my dad and your mom get married do you think your mom would mind if I call her 'mom?'"

"No, she won't mind at all. Do you think your dad will mind if I call him 'dad'?"

"Nope, he won't mind. There's a guest bedroom across from my dad's study. I guess that will be your bedroom. It's a little smaller than my room, unless you wanna just share a room which is cool with me."

"Yeah, that's cool with me too, but maybe it would be good for me to have my own room. I don't care if it's small."

"Wanna go see it?"

"Sure."

They jumped off the tramp just as Bella called from the door. "Logan, it's time to go."

"Okay," he answered. The boys ran toward her and into the house. "We'll be right back," they said as they ran through the living room and down the hall.

Bella looked at Mark. "What do you think they're up to?"

Mark frowned. "Not sure. I'll ask JoJo later." He pulled Bella to him once more. "I don't want to let you go back to that house."

She smiled. "It's okay, Mark. Really. Your love, it's made me feel strong. I don't feel afraid anymore. One more week. Just one. And then, I'll be free and it's worth one more week to be sure I can keep Logan away from him."

Mark nodded, scooped up his keys and wallet from the bar top where he'd tossed them last night. "You're right. We'll be strong together. One more week. And then, you're mine." He kissed her hard and fast, let her go abruptly. "Boys! Let's go!"

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Bella eyed the dining room table, checking off the mental list. Napkins folded perfectly. Water glasses spotless. Tablecloth smooth. Sunday china sparkling. She wouldn't set out the meal until he was home in case he was delayed in some way. Joey had called two hours ago to say he was two hours away but to keep in mind he had to drop off his girlfriend. Then he'd called back fifteen minutes ago to say he was almost home.

She glanced at the clock when she heard the garage door open. Turning quickly, she rushed back into the kitchen and busied herself at the sink. She braced herself for the moment and turned when the kitchen door opened. "Gordon! Welcome home. So, how was your trip?"

Gordon rolled his eyes at her. "It was long and tedious. I'm tired and I need a drink."

"Oh, of course. The regular?"

"Yes," he mumbled as he dropped his suitcase by the kitchen door. "Get that upstairs and unpacked for me," he ordered.

"Right away," Bella answered cheerfully. "Why don't you have a seat in the den and I'll bring you your drink. Dinner is ready whenever you want to eat."

"Not hungry."

Bella's smile faded for just a split second. "Oh, okay. I'll just get that drink."

"Do that," he growled as he walked past her, headed toward the den.

She poured a scotch and hurried after him. "Here ya go," she said cheerfully, handing it to him where he sat on the sectional sofa.

His eyes narrowed at her as she placed the drink in his hand. "What's got you in such high spirits? Did you like having me gone?"

She swallowed. "No, I, uh, I guess, I mean, I was just excited to have you home."

"Missed me, huh? Maybe I should go away more often. Maybe that's the only way to have you appreciate me." He took a large swallow of the drink, set it down on the table in front of him, then swung his legs around to rest on a cushion on the sofa. Like a cobra striking, he reached out, grabbed Bella by the wrist and jerked her forward, causing her to fall against him.

At his post parked on the street just down from the house, Joey sat up straight, mumbling a soft curse.

Gordon grabbed Bella by the ponytail, tilted her head up to him. "If you missed me so much why haven't you tried to give me one of your welcome home kisses?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He took her mouth fiercely, then pulled her back so he could look at her face. "Something's different."

She couldn't help it. Her entire body trembled. "D-different?" she asked, hating that she heard the fear in her voice again.

Joey started the engine, put the car in gear, began backing out from behind the shrubbery.

Gordon sniffed loudly. "You changed shampoos?"

Bella's face paled. "Shampoos? Uh, yeah, actually. They didn't have the one I usually use so I bought some cheap stuff."

He pulled her hair again, bringing her head closer to his nose, breathed deeply. "I don't like it."

"Me neither really. I'm gonna throw it away and get my old stuff."

He let her go. "Good."

Bella stood up, smoothed her clothes. "Um, are you sure I can't get you something to eat?"

"I'm sure. Just leave me alone."

"Okay, well, I'll go unpack for you."

"You do that. And where's my son?"

"He's reading in his room."

"Well, tell him his father's home and have him come and greet me."

"Yes, of course." She forced a smile. "Well, welcome home, Gordon. Logan will be right down."

Joey pulled back in, turned off the engine. He was usually pretty calm and collected, but something about this man made Joey want to kill him, no, not kill him. He just wanted to mess him up really good. But he wanted him to live, because it's the shame that would hurt Gordon Landow the most. The shame of being worked over by a member of the Kino family. Man, this was a flaw, Joey knew. At least that's what his stepfather would say. Don't lower yourself, Joey boy, he thought. He shook his head. Gotta get my head clear so I can do my job right. All I know is, it's a good thing Mark isn't hearing all this crap. And Breez too.

Breez had been visibly upset Saturday night by the actions of a man she didn't know toward a woman she didn't know. He couldn't imagine the turmoil she'd be in if she saw the video he'd recorded over the past few weeks. And Mark. Mark appeared to others to be calm at all times, but Joey knew Mark had a dark side. A side that, when exposed, could prove to be lethal. Better to never let either one of them see the evidence he's collected of the abuse of Bella Landow.

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"Court is now in session," the bailiff announced.

Mark noted that though Gordon was inside the courtroom this time, he had stopped to shake hands with a few other attorneys who seemed to relish the fact that the great Gordon Landow stopped to chat with them. Gordon laughed, and finally hurried off to find his seat, in the first row, of course. Gordon was so focused on his socializing that he hadn't even noticed that Judge Mayfield was frowning in his direction. When he finally looked up, he smiled at the judge and nodded as if they were old friends. Mark shook his head.

The judge went through all the pre-hearing criteria and called the first case. Mark was on his own today as Justin was in State court this morning. Fortunately, Mark felt relatively relaxed. He'd prepared well for the three cases he would present today. While he looked over those cases, he heard the judge call Gordon's name.

Gordon stood, smiled at the judge.

"Mr. Landow, do you have the medical paperwork I asked you to procure over the weekend?"

"Yes, sir, I have it right here," Gordon said proudly.

The judge motioned him forward. Gordon approached and handed him the files.

"If you will recall, Mr. Landow, I specifically requested that you have this on my desk first thing this morning."

"Uh, yes, sir, I was running a little late and knew I would see you in court first thing this morning."

"So, you simply bypassed my office."

"Yes, sir."

"The reason I wanted them on my desk was so I could look into the information and make a ruling this morning on the case. Now I will have to wait until later this afternoon."

"Uh, sorry, sir," Gordon offered.

Mark watched as the back of Gordon's neck turned bright red and his hand balled into a fist. This didn't bode well.

"May I assume that you now have the copies of the email that Mr. Kinder sent to the police department and the one he also sent to the webmaster of the porn site?"

Obviously perturbed, Gordon ran a hand through his short, blond hair. "No, sir, I spent the weekend in Bakersfield obtaining the medical documents needed in the case. There was, uh, no other time."

"In a firm your size, surely you have several assistants at your disposal to handle small yet important details such as these?"

"Yes, sir, but we've been under a bit of a crunch lately."

"Yes, I know about the two murder cases your firm is handling. Nevertheless, dare I say that Mr. Kinder's life is equally important. I will expect the copies of those emails on my desk this afternoon. I'll make a ruling then." He stopped, nodded at the Assistant District Attorney. "I'll be in touch with you on this case."

"Yes, Your Honor," the woman said.

Mark heaved a sigh and hoped the judge's mood would improve as the day moved on.

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Eyes closed, Bella hummed as she soaked in the mound of bubbles. She couldn't stop thinking about Mark kissing her, holding her. She'd barely been able to make the bed, do the breakfast dishes

and put in a load of laundry. It was as if everything she did took just too much concentration when all she wanted to think about was Mark.

She'd actually eaten spaghetti by candlelight on the floor of Mark Adams' living room. It was the best spaghetti she'd ever eaten. They'd had more wine, and for dessert, he'd offered her simple vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce. It was exquisite.

She sighed as she remembered him pushing her back on the carpet, and kissing her so softly. So tenderly. How could a man be so kind, so strong, and so gentle? Lord, she was hopelessly in love with him.

Bella rubbed the sponge over her body as she remembered every moment with Mark. She knew it was late and Logan would be home from school soon. She knew she had to get out and get dressed. Gordon would be home in a few hours.

Funny how before, even the thought of Gordon coming home sent shivers down her spine. Not now. Somewhere in the past few days, she'd found courage. She'd found some kind of inner strength. Gordon was not gonna torture her anymore. She would not hang her head anymore. She didn't deserve it. She didn't deserve to be hit, hurt, even raped by her husband. And he won't be her husband much longer.

She let out the water and rose, smiling as she eyed her body in the mirror. She was tired of waiting. Mark and Joey said they needed evidence of Gordon's abuse to keep him from getting custody of Logan. Well then, if it's evidence they need, she'll give it to them. And she didn't feel a bit afraid.

✝✝✝

Deuteronomy 31:8

"It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

Chapter Ten

"Mom!" Logan yelled as soon as he came through the door.

"I'm upstairs," Bella called back. She heard the clumping of Logan's big feet running up the steps. She opened the door to her bedroom and stepped out into the hall with a big smile on her face.

"Hi, Mom," Logan said.

"Hey, sweetie. How was school? Anything cool happen?"

Logan smiled at his mom trying to be hip. "Not much. Got an 'A' on that English paper I did Friday. And some kids got into a fight in the cafeteria. Girls. It was pretty cool."

Bella laughed. "Oh, I bet it was. Do you have any homework?"

"Yeah, I have a few little things. Not much, really. Right now, though, I'm starved."

"Well, go drop your books in your room and come to the kitchen and have a sandwich."

"'Kay," he said with a smile, then quickly kissed her cheek and hurried to his room.

Bella headed down to make the sandwich. She was humming when Logan arrived in the kitchen. He opened the fridge and pulled out a carton of orange juice. Bella reached up into the cabinet, retrieved a glass and set it down in front of him.

He smiled at her. "Thanks." His heart felt light. His mom seemed like a different person. She seemed almost, what? Happy? Whatever happened between her and Master Mark, it changed everything and Logan found himself feeling extremely grateful to Master Mark.

"You want cheese?"

"Yeah, two slices." At the sound of his phone buzzing, he turned away and answered. Logan spoke on the phone for a few minutes. Bella couldn't make out what he was saying but she could tell he was giving a negative answer.

"Who is it, Logan?" she asked.

"Hold on a minute," he said, putting his phone on mute. "It's some

guys from my class. They want to know if I can come play a pickup game of football at the practice field."

"Are you gonna go?"

His brow furrowed. "I, uh, wasn't going to. I mean, I know Dad will be home soon and..."

"Don't you worry about that. If you want to go play with your friends then go. You're a young boy, you need the exercise."

"I don't want to cause any trouble, Mom, you know. And these guys only want me to join them because somehow it got around that I spent the weekend at Ricky Kino's house."

"Oh!" Bella shrugged. "Well then, have some fun with it. As long as you know where they stand, there's no harm in reaping the benefits of a little instant popularity."

Logan frowned. This so didn't sound like his mother.

Bella smiled sweetly. "Go. Have fun. I'll explain it to your father. It will be okay."

"But..."

"Go. I insist. I'm sure I can make him understand."

Logan shrugged. "Okay, if you say so." He took it off mute and put the phone back to his ear. "Well, it looks like I can come after all. Yeah. No. I'll ride my bike. Be there in about twenty minutes. 'K. Bye."

Bella shoved a plate at him. "Eat this first. You know I hate to see my baby go hungry."

He rolled his eyes at her calling him 'her baby' which made her smile. She'd been about to suggest that he take some time to go to the library and study there, but this was even better. Looks like things are going her way.

He finished his sandwich, ran upstairs, changed clothes, kissed her cheek again and went out the garage door to grab his bike.

Bella immediately started dinner. She didn't want it to be late. She had a few hours before Gordon got home.

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Mark stood on the sidelines at the middle school. He couldn't help but feel pride and joy in the accomplishments of his son. The child had been such a surprise to him. He'd been presented with a son he hadn't known he had a few months before his nineteenth birthday. A son conceived on his eighteenth birthday under very weird circumstances.

But the moment he'd seen him, he loved him. The very moment. He didn't know what he would've done had his mom and stepfather not stepped in to help. And now, little Joseph Adams was twelve years old and a great source of pride as he marched the offense down the field.

He was a natural athlete. He'd worked hard to perfect his throwing motion, his footwork, his accuracy. The coaches were excited to have him. To have a kid in middle school with his kind of arm, one that could do so much more than hand the ball off and toss little dump passes, was incredible. Not only that, but JoJo was smart. A quick thinker. He could read a defense. He could audible, which was unheard of at this age. Add in the fact that he was one of the fastest on the team along with one receiver and a feisty little running back, and the coaches felt certain the season was gonna be a huge success. They'd won their first two games. The high school coach had already taken time to speak to Mark at the game last Thursday afternoon and JoJo still had another year left to play in middle school.

Mark watched as JoJo dropped back and fired a forty-yard pass right into the receiver's numbers. Oh, yeah, Mark thought. He had to agree with the coaches, it was gonna be a good year. JoJo turned and smiled at his dad. Mark gave him a thumbs up.

And then his mind switched to the future. Bella would be with him. She would come to all the games and help cheer for JoJo. What about Logan? He wondered if Logan was interested in football. If so, Mark would help him get up to speed. If not, Mark would help him in anything he was interested in. He was such a good kid. He deserved a father who truly cared about him and his well-being. Mark smiled as he imagined JoJo and Logan playing on the same team. Wouldn't it be a great time?

He glanced at his watch. Practice was almost over. Mark had several cases to work on tonight so he might stop and get fast food on the way home. He could hear his own mother giving him an earful about feeding JoJo junk food. But once in a while was okay, Mark thought. It would have to be okay. Mark didn't want to strike out in court like Gordon Landow did today.

The thought made his mind jump immediately to Bella. Man, he hoped she was okay. He'd called Joey to warn him once again that Gordon might be in an ill mood. He trusted his brother to keep her safe.

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"Well, well, well, look who's home in time for dinner," Shelley said as Jeffy walked through the kitchen door.

Dr. June Flower Kino shrugged. "All's quiet right now at the hospital and I figured I'd better get while the gettin's good, so here I am. Besides, I start third shift on Wednesday night so I get some time to rest. So, what's for dinner? Whatever it is, it smells really good." She kissed her mom's cheek and then moved across the room to where her father was stirring something around in a wok. She kissed him and leaned over, inhaling the aromas.

"Ummm," she sighed. "Bengali chicken curry with potatoes. One of my top ten favs."

Her father smiled at her. "Judging from the way you inhale food, is there anything that isn't one of your top ten?"

Jeffy giggled. "I'm with Mom on boiled okra."

Eric gave a soft laugh. "Your mother let me know that the very first day I met her," he said, glancing at his wife of twenty years who was looking at him with so much love in her eyes. He looked back to Jeffy. "Anyway, it's almost ready."

"Awesome, I'll set the table," Jeffy offered.

Ten minutes later Eric, Shelley and Jeffy sat around the kitchen table eating delicious food and catching up on family news and events.

"Oh, and, I spoke with Angel today," Shelley said. "Apparently, Joey and Breez found a woman Saturday night who'd been beat up by her husband. The guy came after the woman and Joey had to stop him."

"Was he hurt?" Jeffy asked.

"Who, Joey?" Shelley asked.

"Are you kidding me?" Eric asked.

"I meant the husband," Jeffy clarified. "First, if Joey had been hurt I'd know and second, why in the world would I automatically think Joey had been hurt?"

"That's what I was wondering," Eric said with a chuckle.

Jeffy grinned. "I'm glad Joey was there to help her. And wasn't it just so nice to meet Breez Saturday when Joey brought her by? I really like her. I think she and Joey are gonna hit it off big time."

"I think so too," Shelley said. "And I really like her sister, Bella. Such a sweet girl."

"I think so too. Sweet, but really sad," Jeffy added.

"When Mark is able..." Eric stopped when Jeffy jumped back in her chair. "Jeffy?"

She jumped again, her hands slamming down on the table in startled reflex. Suddenly, she gasped loudly, her hands came up as if protecting her face. She winced in pain and tried to stand but instead toppled over backward in her chair.

Eric and Shelley were at her side immediately.

"Jeffy?" Eric said softly. "Look at me, baby girl. Come back to the present. It isn't real."

Jeffy blinked up at her father as tears ran over her cheeks. "I, I'm sorry. It seemed so real."

"It looks real too," Shelley said.

"What do you mean?"

"Your nose is bleeding," Eric answered, a frown darkening his face.

Jeffy touched her nose and looked at the blood on her hand. "Well, that's never happened before. That concerns me."

"Yeah, me too," Eric said as he helped her up and righted her chair. "Here, sit down."

Jeffy obeyed and accepted the napkin Shelley held out to her.

"What did you see?" Shelley asked.

Jeffy shook her head. "Nothing really. I didn't really *see* anything. It was more like I felt something."

"What did you feel?"

"I felt like I'd been hit in the face with a two-by-four."

"Get any impressions as to who this has to do with?"

She closed her eyes, tried to steady her thoughts. "All I can think of is Mark."

Eric eyed Shelley who immediately nodded, rose and went to make a quick call.

Jeffy blotted her nose, wiped her tears.

"How long has it been since your last vision?" Eric asked.

"Saturday," Jeffy said. "When I hugged Breez."

"What did you see then?"

Jeffy looked down. "It was so fleeting, but clear as a bell. I saw her in a wedding dress."

Eric nodded. "Did you tell Joey?"

"No. I thought it would be better to let things happen as they will."

"Well, Jeffy, they'll do that whether you tell him or not but I understand your reluctance."

"If something good is gonna happen, I don't want to interfere in any way. Yet, if I can keep something bad from happening, isn't that the purpose of having these stupid visions?"

"The purpose? I'm not sure of the purpose."

"Are you kidding me, Dad? All the dreams and visions you've had? All the research you've done?"

"My dreams and visions could be qualified as nothing more than a slight psychic ability. They are nothing like what you have."

"But why, Dad? Why me? For what purpose?"

"Jeffy, you know I believe you were meant to accomplish something special during your time in this world. Unfortunately, I don't see a consistent pattern to your visions. I mean, having the visions about so many things, involving so many different people. I just don't know. Perhaps they are just an exercise to prepare you for what's to come. Perhaps your mind is simply more open than others and you see things at random. The visions I've had sometimes meant a lot, like seeing your mom in my dreams long before I met her. Or the ones that predicted coming danger, even though some of those seemed to have rotten timing. Like seeing Joey have that car accident seconds before it actually happened. Seconds before really didn't help."

"But like you said, maybe that was the time your vision was able to get through because your mind was occupied with other things. Maybe if you'd tried to sit down and see things instead of waiting for them to come to you, maybe you would've known days before the accident and been able to warn him."

Eric shrugged. "Maybe. But I meditate daily and..."

"And when you do that, you clear your mind, you still it. Maybe we need to go the opposite direction. Let's stop being passive. Maybe we have to actively ask for the visions. Maybe we're thinking about this all wrong. Maybe we need to see if we can summon the visions and thereby control them. We need to ask God to send them in time to help."

Eric nodded at her thoughtfully, touched her hair. "You just may be right. Soon, you and I will have to do some experimenting."

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Bella lounged in the front room flipping through a magazine even though her mind was completely somewhere else. Her heart beat a little faster when she heard Gordon drive up, but only a little faster because she truly wasn't afraid anymore.

Glancing out the window she saw that he was pulling up in front of the house on the circular drive rather than going inside the garage, which meant he had plans of going out again tonight. If things went the way she expected, that probably wouldn't happen.

She watched him get out of the car, then lean back in to retrieve his briefcase. He closed the car door, circled around the back of the car and walked up the front steps. He was frowning, which normally would have Bella wringing her hands in worry over his mood. Tonight though, it only made her smile.

Looking back down at the pages in the magazine, she waited until he'd come in the door and stood there in the foyer, looking at her before she glanced up at him.

"Oh, hello, Gordon," she said cheerfully, placing the magazine down and standing up. "How was your day?"

"What are you doing?"

She smiled. "Just looking through a magazine, hoping to get some ideas for remodeling in here. It seems so stuffy and old-fashioned, don't you think?"

"This house is classically formal, you idiot. It has conventional, established style and you're not changing a thing."

She smiled. "Actually, I've already bought a few new things. We'll just have to see how you like them. I'm betting you will."

She walked past him as she said the last line but didn't miss the dropping of his jaw.

He turned, looking after her. "Take my briefcase to my study and bring me a drink, I've had a helluva day."

"What did you say?" Bella called from the kitchen.

He walked quietly into the kitchen. "I said," he repeated, his voice soft, "to take my briefcase into the study and bring me a drink."

She turned, smiling brightly. "Oh, sorry, I didn't hear you. Okay, I'll take care of it in just a minute. You go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I have like a million things to do. I'm afraid dinner is gonna be late."

He reached out, grabbed her wrist. "I said I want a drink."

She looked up at him haughtily. "And I said to make yourself comfortable and I'll bring it to you in a minute." She jerked her wrist away from him and went to open the oven.

Gordon stood there watching her as she made 'tsking' sounds at whatever she had cooking. Who did she think she was talking to? Something was up. If he didn't know her better he would think that while he'd been out of town for the weekend, she'd attended some sort of women's group. Well, if she thought she was gonna speak to him like this, and dismiss him without a care, she had another thing coming, and it wasn't gonna be pleasant. Still, he was in no hurry. He'd just bide his time and let her dig herself into a hole.

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Joey, out in his car at his post, was sitting up very straight. What was she doing? Though, it was obvious to him, she was egging him on. Dear Jesus, this is gonna get bad. Did she and Mark devise a plan? No, Mark would not do anything to put Bella in more danger than she was already in. This was something Bella was doing all on her own.

He thought for a second he should call Mark and tell him what Bella was up to so he could talk some sense into her, but quickly changed his mind. It was too late for that. All that would do now is serve to drive Mark out of his mind with worry. Joey shook his head.

He checked his weapon, placed it in his shoulder holster, grabbed cuffs out of the glove compartment and shoved them in his front pants pocket. Next he placed a call to Jason, letting him know what was going on and that if he called again it would be for Jason to notify police and ambulance. He shoved his cell into his other pocket and waited. This was not gonna be pretty.

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Bella made Gordon wait a good ten minutes before she brought the drink to him. She handed it to him with a giant smile. "Sorry it took so long. I couldn't find the olives. I could've sworn we had some, but I couldn't find them. Oh, well, hope this is okay." She handed him the glass and before he could even get a word out, she spun, headed out of the den. "I hope you're not too hungry. Dinner will be a while." She left the room quickly, went past the front door and locked it.

When she got back to the kitchen she leaned against the counter for support and took several large breaths, trying to steady herself. Okay, she admitted to herself, she was a little afraid. But this had to be

done and she had to do it now, while Logan was gone. She checked the roast in the oven and waited until she heard Gordon's footsteps in the hall. Then she gathered the plates and glasses and entered the dining room just as he was sitting down.

"Bella," Gordon said, in the soft menacing tone he'd perfected. "You know how I hate dinner to be late."

"I know," she said flippantly, "but somehow time just got away from me today. It's almost done. You need to learn to bend a little."

His eyes narrowed at her. She turned quickly to finish setting the table. Gordon didn't move as she worked around him. Finally, she brought out the meal, a bowl of mashed potatoes, some mixed vegetable blend and a platter of roast beef.

"No salad?" he asked.

She smiled, shrugged. "No time."

"No time," he repeated. "Where's my son?"

"He's at the school playing football with some friends. He'll be home soon."

"I want my son home when I get home. You know that."

"Yes, I know, however, Logan is just a kid and kids need to be with kids their own age."

"You're second-guessing my parenting rules?"

She lifted her chin slightly as she sat down at her place. "Well, Gordon, Logan is my child too."

"You may have given birth to him, but..."

"Would you like some potatoes?"

"Did you just interrupt me?"

"I'm just trying to serve you before the food gets cold."

Without waiting for an answer, Bella scooped mashed potatoes onto his plate and then added a few spoonfuls of vegetables. Next she sliced a piece of roast beef and put it on his plate.

"That appears to be well done," Gordon said.

Bella looked at the meat. "Oh, dear. It might be a little overcooked. Maybe if I cut farther into it." She began slicing a few inches farther into the meat. It had a little pink in it. Smiling, she put it on his plate and took the other back.

Frowning, Gordon poked the meat with his fork and then placed his fork down slowly. "This is still way overcooked."

She put down the knife and fork, placed her hands down by her

side and gripped the seat of her chair. "Well, that looks like the best you're gonna get from this roast. I guess you'll just have to make do."

Gordon looked at her. He didn't bat an eye. "What do you think you're doing, Bella? What silly statement are you trying to make? You know I've let this go on about as far as I'm gonna let it go. Something has snapped in your mind and I'm gonna have to fix it."

She blinked up at him, keeping her mouth shut.

It happened so fast she had no time to block. His fist struck out and plowed into her face. She flew backward in her chair and landed on her back, feet sticking straight up in the air. Quickly, she scampered out of the chair and tried to stand.

Joey gunned the engine, streaked down the street and up the drive to the front of the house.

Gordon picked Bella up by the front of her dress and slammed her against the wall. "You think you can get away with talking to me like that? You think you can best me?" He drew back his fist and punched. Blood spurted.

Joey threw himself at the door but it was locked. He dug the key from his pocket.

Bella felt herself start to lose consciousness, felt herself slipping down, but Gordon pulled her back up against the wall and placed his forearm against her throat. His teeth clenched as he spoke. "I'm gonna drag you upstairs and beat you bloody."

"I don't think so," Joey said as he placed Gordon in a headlock and jerked him away from Bella.

"What the..."

Gordon tried to turn to see who had him. "You! What are you doing in my house?"

"Shut up before I shut you up permanently," Joey answered as he pulled Gordon across the room.

Bella slid limply to the floor.

Gordon tried to wrest himself away from Joey's grip and Joey let him go.

"Get out of my house," Gordon screamed. "I'm calling the police."

Joey gave a derisive laugh. "The police have been called and they're on the way to pick you up, golden boy."

Gordon started toward Joey and Joey grinned. "Listen, there's nothing I'd like better than to have you try to take me on, but right now

I don't have time. I have to see to your wife."

Joey quickly grabbed Gordon and shoved him against the wall. Gordon struggled against Joey's strength, but Joey easily cuffed him and threw him in a chair. "Don't move."

He turned, knelt down beside Bella and lifted her into his arms. "Bella, how you doin', hon?"

She moaned and opened her eyes. "I'm okay."

"Police and ambulance are on the way. You *will* go to the hospital and you *will* press charges."

"That was the plan," she murmured softly.

"Yes, the plan, Ms. Landow. So, when you're all better, we're gonna have a little talk about your plan. And I'm sure Mark will have a lot to add to the discussion."

Bella sighed. "Well, I'm sorry. It had to be done."

Joey brushed some hair away from her bloody face, sighed. "It might've been a stupid plan but I guess no one can call you a coward."

"What is going on?" Gordon demanded.

Joey looked up. "You're had, counselor. You're done. You're going down for felony assault."

"You have nothing on me. Bella is a loyal wife. She won't testify against me. And even if she did, it's her word against mine."

"My word too, Landow, though we don't even need that. It's all on video. Every bit of abuse, emotional and physical for the past few weeks, all of it. Technology is a beautiful thing."

"What are you talking about?"

Joey began to point to places in the ceiling and in the woodwork. Gordon's face paled.

"It's, it's not admissible," Gordon argued.

"Maybe, maybe not. Either way, a judge will see it. Though I think it will be admissible because Bella lives in this house and gave permission for the cameras."

"No, there are laws..."

"Save it," Joey said as the police came screeching up the drive.

"You Agent Adams?" the first officer asked.

Joey nodded, showed his ID. "When I came in, Landow was pounding on his wife."

The officer knelt down beside Joey, looked Bella over. "Geez, he did a number on you. Ambulance should be here any minute." He rose,

nodded to two other officers. "Take him in."

"Uh, let me have my cuffs back if you don't mind," Joey said.

An officer stood Gordon up, uncuffed and recuffed him.

"This is ridiculous," Gordon mumbled then turned toward Bella. "I'll be right back out. You'd better think about what you're doing, Bella. You're making a big mistake."

"It's going on record, Landow, that you continued to threaten your wife even after you'd been arrested. I'd shut up if I were you," Joey said.

Gordon shook with rage. "It's you I'm gonna get, Adams. If it's the last thing I do, I'm gonna make you pay for what you did here today."

Joey shrugged. "Bring it on."

The officers took Gordon by the arm and began to escort him out the door, but Gordon turned and looked back over his shoulder. "You're a dead man, Adams."

"We all are. Just a matter of time."

The paramedics arrived. Joey moved aside to let them tend to Bella. Now that he was free for a minute he pulled his phone and called Mark.

"Yeah, what's up, Joe," Mark asked casually.

"Landow went after Bella. I intervened, but not fast enough. He bashed in her face. She'll be on the way to the hospital soon."

Mark stood. "I'm on my way."

"See you there. Uh, Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"Sorry, man. I mean, it happened so fast and she locked the door. It took me a minute to get to her."

"Whatever happened wasn't your fault. I'm positive you were not guilty of any kind of negligence."

"Mom! Mom!"

"Damn," Joey said. "Logan just got home, gotta go."

Joey rushed out onto the porch, motioned for the officer to let Logan go. The boy ran up the steps. Joey grabbed him. "Logan, you know who I am? I'm Master Mark's brother. Listen, your mom, she's okay. It looks bad but she's okay," Joey said. "Do you hear me?"

Logan stopped trying to get past Joey and looked into his eyes. Finally, he nodded. "Yes, sir. Can I see her?"

"Yes, and then you can ride to the hospital with me, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

Joey let him go and he rushed to his mother's side.

"Mom?" Logan said.

Bella looked over from the stretcher they'd made her lie on. "I'm okay, Logan. I promise."

"Your face is all bashed in, Mom."

"I know it looks bad, but he only hit me a few times before Joey came in."

"I hate him. I hate him. I wish he would die."

"Oh, sweetie," Bella said softly. "Don't say that, and don't worry. Everything's gonna be okay—now."

"He hit you cuz I wasn't home, didn't he?"

"No, hon, it was because I overcooked the meat."

The paramedic touched her shoulder. "You ready to go for a ride?"

Bella nodded. "What about my son?"

"I'm goin' to the hospital with Mr. Adams. Don't worry about me."

While Logan watched them take his mother out to the waiting ambulance, Joey placed a call to Breez.

"Hey my hunky guy," Breez purred into the phone. "Why are you calling me while you're on duty?"

Joey only sighed.

Breez sat up straighter. "Joey? Is Bella okay?"

"He got to her. She's okay, but she's on the way to the hospital. Gordon has been arrested."

"Oh, God. But she's okay?"

"Yeah, he hit her in the face and I'm really sorry about that, but yeah, she's okay."

Breez sighed. "Really, this is good isn't it? I mean, he beat her up, it's on video, right?"

"Yes."

"So it's over. We got that SOB. We got him."

"It's not gonna be that easy, but we have a lot on our side."

"Where's Logan, is he okay?"

"Logan wasn't home when it happened. There are reasons for that which I can't discuss with you at this time. Logan is here with me now. I'll bring him to the hospital."

"Okay," Breez said with a sniff. "Thank you, Joey. Thank you so much. I'll meet you at the hospital."

Joey hung up and went to Logan. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, because your mom is really gonna need you to be strong, but I just want you to know that, with me, it's okay to let me know you're upset, because I totally understand."

Logan nodded. "Yes, sir. Did they arrest my dad?"

"Yes they did. He'll spend the night in jail but just to be honest between us guys, he'll probably get out on bail in the morning."

"I wish he'd stay in jail forever."

"I understand. Listen, I'm not sure what your Aunt Breez and your mom have planned for you, but, it might be a good idea to run upstairs and grab a bag with some clothes and your toothbrush. Maybe even your school stuff, just in case."

Logan nodded. "Yes, sir. I'll be right back."

Joey sighed as he watched the brave young man dash up the stairs.

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"Aunt Breez," Logan said as they entered the ER waiting room.

Breez opened her arms. She didn't have to bend because her nephew was as tall as her. He went into her arms. She kissed his cheek.

"She's gonna be okay, sweetie. They're cleaning her up now. They think she may have a hairline fracture in her cheek so they're gonna take her down for X-rays in a little bit."

"Her cheek is broken?"

"Maybe."

"Can I see her?"

"Yes, in just a minute. Mark is back there with her now. They asked that only one person go back there at a time because the emergency exam rooms are so small, okay?"

"Okay. I'm glad Master Mark is with her."

"Yeah, me too. She was pretty happy to see him."

Breez glanced up at Joey. "Hey."

He touched her face. "Hey."

"Thank you, Joey, I mean, for being there."

"You don't have to thank me. It's my job."

Logan turned, looked up at him. "Your job?"

"Your Aunt Breez went to Ameritech where I work and hired me

to protect your mom. I was monitoring your mom and dad's conversation on some cameras we have set up in your house. When he attacked her, I got to her as soon as I could."

Much to Joey's relief, Logan nodded as if he understood.

"Did you beat up my dad?"

Joey smiled kindly, recognizing the boy's need to avenge his mother. "No, sorry, I didn't. It wasn't necessary. He didn't try to fight me off. I pulled him away from your mom and cuffed him."

Logan thought about this a moment. He smiled. "I bet he was really mad about that."

Joey grinned. "Yeah, he was."

Logan frowned again. "But, he's gonna be real mad when he gets home tomorrow."

"Well, we won't let him near you or your mom," Breez answered.

Logan looked up to see JoJo coming down the corridor with his arms full of vending machine junk food.

"Logan," JoJo said. "Come over here and sit with me."

The boys headed over to a corner of the room where JoJo dumped his armload of snacks onto one of the chairs. They sat on either side.

"You hungry?" JoJo asked. "I'm just askin' because I'm starved. We ate at Mickey D's on the way home from football practice but it wasn't enough. Did you eat yet?"

Logan shook his head. "No. I was out with some kids when, I mean, well anyway, I'm not hungry."

"Logan, I know what happened. My dad says that it's a good thing in some ways."

"How could he say that?"

"He says since Uncle Joey had cameras in your house, they have a record of your dad beatin' up your mom. Now, she can go ahead and get a divorce from your dad and he won't be able to get custody of you."

Logan listened intently, letting the information filter through his brain. "So, that means she's never going back to him, right?"

JoJo shrugged. "I guess. Why would she? It wouldn't be safe, right? From what my dad says, the only reason your mom stayed with your dad was because of you."

"Me," Logan repeated. He knew that, but he'd never felt the guilt that accompanied the knowledge until just now. His father hurt his

mother and she stayed and faced it because of him. "She stayed because of me but now she doesn't have to anymore."

JoJo realized he may have said the wrong thing. "Yeah, I, uh, look, maybe I said it wrong."

Logan shook his head. "You and me, we're brothers now, right? So, you can say anything to me. We're not ever gonna keep secrets. I know my mom stayed with my dad because my dad told her that if she left he would get custody of me and he would never let her see me again." Logan looked down quickly to hide the tears that welled in his eyes. "I, uh, just feel so sick about it. She stayed and faced him every day because of me. If I didn't exist, she would've left a long time ago. It almost seems like it would be better if I was never born."

JoJo placed a hand on Logan's shoulder. "That's not true, Logan. Don't ever say that. If you were never born, you and me couldn't be brothers. Besides, you *were* born and now that you were, it would kill your mom to lose you, so don't go thinking about weird stuff."

Logan sniffed, looked up. "I guess I can depend on you and Eric to always tell it like it is."

JoJo nodded, grinned. "Yep. Absolutely always." He picked up a Snickers bar and unwrapped it. "Sure you don't want something? I hardly ever get to eat junk so I'm taking advantage of it."

Logan forced a smile. "Yeah, me neither." He held out his hand. JoJo placed the candy bar in his palm and unwrapped another for himself, held it up. "To brotherhood," he said, as if proposing a toast.

"To brotherhood," Logan said softly and took a huge bite.

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Mark leaned over the gurney, brushed a few wisps of hair back from Bella's face and placed a kiss on her forehead. Even though her eyes were closed, she offered a small smile in return.

"How ya doin'?" he asked.

"I'm tired and I want to go home. I have a headache and my face feels like it's gonna explode."

"Yeah, your face is pretty swollen. I guess we'll know soon whether the bone is fractured." He shook his head. "I know it sounds like a silly kind of macho thing, but I really have an uncontrollable urge to beat him to a pulp."

"Tell me you won't. I hate violence."

"No kidding? I wonder why," he said sarcastically, then looked

away to get himself under control. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m sorry. We’re gonna get you home soon and tuck you in and give you some nice narcotics and you can finally get some sleep.”

“Home. Where?”

“There’s nothing I’d like better than to have you stay with me, but you know that wouldn’t be a good idea. You’re gonna stay with Breez.”

“Where’s Logan?”

“Joey has him. He’s bringing him up to the hospital. They might even be here by now. I’m sure he wants to see you. I’ll go on out and see if he’s here.”

He started to leave but Bella grabbed his hand. “Mark, wait.”

He stopped. Leaned over, smiled at her.

“I, I’m glad this happened. Now, or I mean, soon, we...” She stopped, suddenly feeling unsure of her status with Mark.

“We can be together,” he finished for her. “I live for that day. Until then, we take things slow. We get you well. Tomorrow I’ll get a temporary order of custody giving Logan to you. Then we’ll have to file for divorce and file for full custody. It’s not over by a long shot, Bella, but he’ll never hurt you again.”

“I know it sounds crazy, given that I’m lying here in a hospital bed with my face bashed in, but I’m so happy. Life was nothing but fear and darkness every day. It’s not gonna be that way anymore. I can see a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Mark smiled. “You hold onto that thought, my sweet Bella. I’ll go get your son.” He turned but was stopped by a lab tech.

“Hello,” the tech said as he entered the room. “I’ve got orders to take you down to radiology.”

“Will you let us know when she gets back?” Mark asked.

“Yes, sir, I’ll come get you as soon as we get back.”

“Thanks.” He stepped aside and watched them wheel her out of the room and down the corridor before he headed toward the waiting room.

As he approached Joey and Breez, he was surprised to see his stepfather along with Ricky and young Eric come through the ER doors. Young Eric headed over immediately to join Logan and JoJo.

“Hey,” Mark said as he and Joey both turned toward their stepfather and Ricky.

“Hey,” Ricky answered.

Eric nodded, shook both their hands. "How's she doing?"

"Surprisingly well. She said she's glad it happened. She said she can finally see a light at the end of the tunnel. I'm surprised to see you here."

"Well, I thought I might be able to talk to her, see where her mind is at, keep her from sinking into a depression, though it sounds like she's got a handle on things. Those are not the words of a victim."

"Yeah. I have to say, I'm a little astounded by her attitude."

"Sounds like she's gonna be okay," Ricky put in.

"Do they know yet if her cheekbone is fractured?" Breez asked.

"They just took her down to radiology. We'll know soon," Mark said. He nodded at Ricky. "And you're just here to show support?"

Ricky motioned to where his son sat with Logan and JoJo. "Yeah, I actually thought it would be best to stay home and wait for news but young Eric insisted. He said he had to be here for his brother."

"Brother?"

"They did some kind of ritual brotherhood bonding the other day when we went biking in the canyon. I'm not one to interfere with something as special as that, so, here I am. I'm surprised you didn't notice the large cut on JoJo's palm."

Mark frowned. "No, I didn't. Guess my mind has been elsewhere."

Joey spoke up then. "Uh, let's see, Breez, you know my stepfather."

Eric nodded, stepped forward, kissed her cheek. "Good to see you again, Breez. Too bad it's under these circumstances."

Breez nodded. "Nice to see you too."

"I don't think you know Ricky," Joey said.

"I know *of* him, but I've never been introduced."

Ricky reached out and took her hand. "Nice to meet you, Breez. *Cool* name."

Breez giggled. Joey rolled his eyes. As usual, Ricky charmed every female he'd ever met.

Mark stepped forward, offered his hand to his brother. "Joey– Just let me get this out of the way. I'm grateful."

"Come on, Mark, you know there's no thanks necessary. It's my job. I'm just sorry I didn't get to her sooner. I knew it was coming and I should've already been in the driveway. I admit, he took me by surprise."

"You knew it was coming because of me telling you Gordon had a bad day in court?"

"Uh, yes, and no."

"Yes and no? Which is it?"

"She had a plan."

"A plan?"

Joey sighed. "Yes, she provoked him."

Breez drew a deep breath. "No way. She would never do that. You have to be mistaken."

"When you see the video you'll understand. She didn't do anything that any other woman wouldn't do. She played it well for the camera. Being agreeable, smiling, all the while doing every little thing that she knows would drive him insane with anger."

"Don't you think you're making a snap judgment?" Breez asked, her anger growing.

Joey raised his eyebrows. "Come on now, don't get defensive. I call it like I see it. She egged him on. She had it planned. She all but admitted it when I spoke with her. She sent Logan away. At one point she went to the front door, I thought she was just gonna look outside, but then she turned away and went toward the kitchen. I realized when I tried to get in, that she'd locked the door. That was so I couldn't get in right away and Gordon would have time to do some serious damage and it would all be recorded."

"I'm telling you she would never do that." She turned to Mark. "You know her, Mark. You must know that she would never do something like that."

Mark nodded. "Well, I wouldn't think she would, normally, but I trust my brother. Let's not speculate. Why don't we see the video and we can make up our own minds."

Breez shook her head. "Fine. We'll watch the videos, but Bella would never provoke Gordon."

"She would if she was ready to put an end to everything," Joey argued. "She knew the cameras were there. She knew we needed more evidence. She decided to give it to us."

"She put herself in danger so that," Mark stopped. Looked around at all the faces waiting for his next word. "Never mind."

Eric, Ricky and Joey all nodded.

Joey took Breez's hand. "Listen, I have to go to work. I'll come by

later to check on you at the house. I'll bring the video and you can see for yourself, okay?"

She softened. "Okay. You have to go to work now?"

"Yes. Since Gordon now knows the cameras are there, he'll call some experts, get them to remove everything. I want to do that first, before they can."

She pouted. He smiled. "I love the way your nose gets all crinkly when you pout."

She looked up quickly to see if the other men standing there were still listening. She assumed they were since they all had that maddening indulgent smile on their faces. She raised her chin defiantly.

"Goodbye, Joey."

He gave her a quick kiss. "Bye." He turned to Eric. "You might want to have a few words with Logan. He's keeping a stiff upper lip, but I'm sure he's feeling a little confused."

"I'll speak to him. Be careful, Joey," Eric said.

"I always am. Hey, I really gotta go but I'll be with you in spirit when you guys send up some prayers."

Eric nodded. "We gotcha covered."

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"Your mom is gonna ride with Mark over to the house. You wanna ride with me?" his Aunt Breez asked.

"Okay," Logan said, then turned back to Eric and JoJo. "Guess I gotta go."

Young Eric reached out and they clasped hands. "Me and JoJo, we're here for ya, you know? You need anything, you call us. My dad says the next few months are gonna be hard on you and your mom so we just want you to know you're not alone."

Logan nodded. JoJo took his hand the same way. "Can't wait for it to happen."

"It?"

"You know, my dad, your mom, my house."

Logan smiled. "It'll be cool."

"See ya," Eric said.

Breez squeezed Logan's shoulders. "Come on, guy, let's go home."

In the car Logan was quiet. He went over and over in his mind the words that had been spoken to him tonight. So many words. Joey

Adams told him to be strong for his mom, but that he could tell Joey his real stuff. JoJo and Eric told him they were there for him because he was their brother. Ricky Kino told him when things look their worst, it was a good time to test yourself to see just how courageous you really are. Grandmaster Kino didn't really tell him anything. It was more like he asked him questions, but somehow, Logan felt better after he talked to him. He got the feeling Grandmaster Kino truly understood.

Master Mark and his Aunt Breez told him everything was gonna turn out good even though he might feel a little mixed up for a while. But it was his mom's words that stuck with him.

She said it was okay to feel sad. It was okay to feel mad. And to go ahead and get all that out, because they were gonna start a new life and it was gonna be wonderful. They were gonna put all this behind them. He'd laid his head on her shoulder. That was mostly because it was so hard to look at her. Her face was so swollen and bruised, you almost couldn't tell it was her. Besides, the more he looked at her, the madder he got at the man who did that to her. His own father.

Logan tried to remember a time when his father hadn't been mean to his mom, but he couldn't. He'd told that to Grandmaster Kino. Then, Grandmaster Kino asked Logan if sometimes he felt mad at his mom too. At first he'd said 'no', but then he realized, sometimes he did. Sometimes he felt mad at her for no reason at all. Grandmaster Kino said it was a natural feeling and not to feel bad about that. He said Logan's father had taught him that behavior, had taught him to be angry with his mom for no reason. He said, now that Logan knew that, he could understand where it was coming from and it would be easy to not feel that way anymore.

Logan breathed a sigh of relief. He'd thought maybe he was gonna turn out to be a monster, just like his father. Now, he knew, he could choose the way he wanted to be and he wanted to be like Master Mark who was always calm and quiet and never seemed to get mad. Logan realized that was also like Grandmaster Kino and Ricky. He didn't know about Mark's brother, Joey, because he'd just met him, but he'd bet anything he was like that too.

"Got a lot on your mind?" his Aunt Breez asked as she drove.

Logan looked up. "Yeah, I guess. So, like, are we gonna live with you from now on?"

"I would love that, but I'm not sure what your mom wants to do. For now though, I think it's the safest place to be."

"But Dad is gonna know we're at your house."

Breez frowned. "Yeah, I get your point. Maybe we'll keep Agent Adams as your mom's bodyguard until we're sure Gordon has accepted the outcome."

Logan bowed his head and frowned because he knew his father would never accept it. Not ever.

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Mark knocked on the door before he peeked in. Logan sat, in boxers and a t-shirt, cross-legged on the bed. "Hey, Logan," he said softly. "Just thought I'd check in on you and say good night."

Logan looked up at the man who'd been his martial arts instructor every Saturday for the past two years. Until recently that had been the extent of their interaction. Now, he was the man Logan pinned all his hopes on. The man who would take care of his mother. The man who would protect them both. Logan smiled at him. "I'm okay."

Mark nodded. "Well, Logan, whenever JoJo and I are going through a hard time, it always makes us feel better if we say a little prayer together. Would you mind if I pray with you?"

"I don't mind. I think I'd like that."

Mark came forward, sat on the bed, put his hand on Logan's shoulder, closed his eyes and prayed, asking for healing for his mom and for Logan, giving thanks that they are alive, and asking a blessing of peace to fill their hearts.

Logan felt his eyes tear up as a wonderful feeling of peace and warmth flooded his body and the ache in his heart eased.

Mark ended the prayer as always, in Jesus' name, opened his eyes and smiled at Logan. "You, uh, you wanna talk about anything?"

Logan merely shrugged, because there was so much he wanted to say but he was afraid of saying too much and driving Master Mark away.

"You know, if you change your mind about school, it's okay to miss a day or two."

"I know, but at least if I go to school it will take my mind off of things for a while."

Mark nodded. "I completely understand."

"Master Mark, um..."

"It's just Mark right now. Master Mark is only for class, okay?"

"Okay. I was wondering. Are you gonna stay here tonight?"

Mark studied him and realized the kid was scared. "I was planning on it. Will that make you feel better?"

"If you stay here, yeah, but, I mean, where's JoJo?"

"He went home with Eric. His uncle will drive him to school in the morning, so that frees me up to stay here. Logan, you know your father won't get out until tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, sir, I know. But then what?"

"We get a restraining order, which means he won't be allowed to come near you or your mom. And I'm gonna talk to a judge tomorrow for your mom and get her temporary custody of you."

Silently, Logan looked down at his hands while he thought about what Mark said. When he looked up he couldn't hide his dismay. "My dad won't care about a restraining order. He's gonna be mad. Real mad."

Mark placed his hand on Logan's shoulder. "I won't let anything happen to you or your mom. Do you believe me?"

"Yeah, but, you can't be with us all the time."

"I'll make arrangements."

"Aunt Breez says she's gonna keep your brother as my mom's bodyguard for a while."

"That's a good idea."

Logan nodded. "He's as good as you, right?"

Mark smiled. "He's better."

"But he's your *little* brother."

"Yeah, but protection is his specialty."

Logan thought about that. Finally, he nodded.

"I know this is hard on you, son. I know you're probably a little scared and everything's all messed up. Sometimes though, that means big changes are happening. Changes for the best."

Logan tried to stop the tears from filling his eyes, but he was unable to. They started coming when Mark used the word 'son.' "I, I want change," he forced out, his voice thick with emotion.

Mark took Logan's face in his hands. "I'm gonna tell you something, Logan. First, I think you should know that I'm in love with your mother and I want only what's best for her. Now, you're the only one I've told this and I'm telling you because I know you love her too

and now you know you have someone on your side. Second, I truly care for you. I could say I love you too, but you'd probably think that's too mushy for me to say, so I won't say that to you yet, but I will say I think you're a fine young man and I would be proud to have you as a son. And last, I want you to know that it's okay to cry. Crying is a body's natural release mechanism. It helps to cleanse the soul."

Logan looked down as Mark's words caused the dam to break. He sniffed loudly and next thing he knew he felt strong arms around him and he was pressed against Master Mark's chest. He didn't pull away. He didn't think Mark would let him anyway. He cried silently as he thought how good it would feel to have a father like this. One who truly cared for him, who actually hugged him like he'd seen other fathers do to their sons. For just a moment he felt safe.

They sprang apart at the knock on the door. Logan quickly wiped his tears. Mark cleared his throat. "Come in," he said softly.

Breez looked in. "Oh, hi, you two. I just came in to tell Logan goodnight."

Mark stood. "I'll leave you alone." He nodded at Logan. "See you in the morning."

Logan smiled. "Okay. Goodnight, Master Mark. Uh, I mean, Mark."

"Goodnight."

Breez nodded at Mark and then turned to Logan. "Can I get you anything, sweetheart?"

"No, Aunt Breez, but thanks."

"Some milk and cookies or something like that?"

Logan smiled. "I'm not a little kid anymore."

"Oh. Well, okay. Anyway, if you decide you want anything, feel free to raid the kitchen."

"Thanks. Is Mom still sleeping?"

"Yes. Hey, listen, she's gonna be okay."

"I know."

"Well, goodnight, Logan. I love you."

He smiled. "Love you too. 'Night, Aunt Breez."

She leaned down, kissed his cheek, turned quickly and left the room. Drawing a deep breath, she headed downstairs. Entering the kitchen, she drew up short. A man sat at the breakfast table. The faint light coming through the bay window was the only illumination.

"Mark?"

"Yeah, it's me. Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

"No, it's okay. I'm not used to having so many people around. Can I get you anything?"

Mark smiled at her. "If I needed something, I wouldn't trouble you to get it for me."

She smiled. "Well said. You sound a lot like Joey," she said as she came forward and took a seat across from him.

He grinned. "Actually, Joey sounds a lot like me."

She laughed. "Now you really sound like Joey."

"I concede."

Breez took a moment to look him over. Mark was an extremely handsome man. He was a little taller than Joey, by a few inches. Big and brawny. Not fat though. The words, 'lean, mean, fighting machine,' came to mind. He had light brown hair, with streaks of sun and a deep tan so he must spend a lot of time outdoors. He had a strong jawline, the same gorgeous lips as Joey and just the hint of dimples, again like Joey. His eyes were brown and kind. He had a gentleness about him that reminded her of his mother and stepfather.

He raised his brows at her and she realized she'd been staring at him. She smiled. "So, why are you sitting here in the dark?"

"Just thinking. Don't need light for that."

"Thinking about Bella?"

He nodded. "Seems the subject of the hour. I'm glad her cheekbone wasn't broken."

"Me too." She looked into his eyes. "You love her, huh?"

"I do." He looked her over. "You feel the same about Joey?"

She smiled. "Touché."

He shrugged, not missing the fact that she'd avoided the answer. That worried him a little. Not that Joey couldn't handle a little heartache. He just hated for his brother to be hurt. Still, their relationship was young and Joey was probably taking things slow.

"So," Breez began, "I'm guessing that you want to step in and sweep my sister off her feet?"

Mark frowned, recognizing the edge in Breez's voice. She was upset and feeling defensive. Suddenly, he wished his brother were here. "Actually, no," he finally answered. "I want to set her firmly *on* her feet. Believe it or not, I want her to be happy and that probably means

that she'll need to discover her own strength, which she has plenty of. She just needs to realize it."

Breez's lips drew into a pout at the answer. Finally, she nodded. "Okay, so you're one of the good guys."

"I do my best."

"Your brother, he's a good guy too."

"I'll tell him you said so."

"Please don't."

Mark smiled. "Okay."

"What are you smiling at?"

"I can see why Joey likes you so much."

"Oh, you can, can you?"

"Yeah, I can," Mark said with a smile. "You wanna fight, don't ya? Listen, I'd love to indulge you, but I'm pretty tired. You'll have to wait for Joey to come back. Right now, maybe you could just tell me where I could bunk down for the night, if it's okay with you. Logan wants me to stay. He's feeling a little jumpy. And I'd like to be around to watch over Bella, again, if you don't mind."

Breez rolled her eyes. "As if I wouldn't let you stay." She stood. "Come on then. There's like a guzillion bedrooms in this giant monstrosity of a house."

Mark followed her through the dining room to the back stairs. "I think the house is quite nice," he said.

She turned, frowned at him, turned back. "Thanks. My mother had a light touch. Everything airy and bright. Clean lines, open spaces. I haven't changed anything."

"Then you must have the same good taste as your mother."

She glanced briefly back over her shoulder. "I don't know what shape the room is in. I have a service come in once a month to vacuum and dust everything, floors, windows. It's been almost that long since their last visit."

"I'm sure I can make do," Mark said dryly.

They passed by Bella's room, and then stopped at a door just across from Logan's.

"Hope this is okay," Breez said.

Mark stepped into the room. Just like Breez had said, it was light and airy in shades of green and yellow and white. It held the normal things: bed, nightstand, dresser. A comfortable-looking chair

upholstered in a print of soft yellow flowers sat next to a table. On the table, a sleek lamp and a stack of books. What drew the eye, however, was the beautiful painting that hung on the wall just above the table and chair.

"Wow," Mark said softly as he moved to the painting and studied it closely. "Marvelous," he said.

The painting was of a spring meadow. Several shades of greens and yellows, blue sky, white clouds, a few pinks and browns. The room had obviously been done to match the painting. "Great painting," Mark said. He turned to look at Breez. "You did this?"

"Yes," she said. "You like it?"

"It's wonderful."

"It's one of my very first paintings. I did it when I was eighteen. I've gotten a lot better since then."

"Better than this? I can't imagine."

"Yeah, your family seems to think the same. They want to hook me up with a gallery. They want me to have a show."

"I can understand. They wouldn't want to see your work go unnoticed. They wouldn't want your light to be hidden. I'd love to buy one of your paintings to display in my home and I say that based only on this one. Imagine what kind of effect you can have on people."

"Well, thanks."

He turned, smiled. "You're welcome. Good night, Breez."

"Good night."

"Everything is locked up tight?"

"Not yet. I didn't want to turn on the alarm because Joey will be coming back sometime tonight."

"Go ahead and turn it on. He'll be able to get in."

"I haven't given him my security code."

"Has he ever seen you punch it in?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then he'll have no problem."

"Oh really?"

Mark grinned. "Wanna bet?"

She frowned. "I have a feeling I'd better not. Good night."

"Night," Mark said again as she left and shut the door.

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Psalm 10:12-15

"Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;
forget not the afflicted. Why does the wicked
renounce God and say in his heart, "You will not call to
account"? But you do see, for you note mischief
and vexation, that you may take it into your hands;
to you the helpless commits himself; you have been
the helper of the fatherless. Break the arm of the wicked and
evildoer; call his wickedness to account till you find none. "

Chapter Eleven

It wasn't a scream that woke him. It was maybe soft crying. Mark glanced at the time on his cell phone as he rose. He'd only been asleep for an hour. He pulled on his slacks, didn't bother with a shirt and went to listen at Bella's door. It was definitely her. He opened the door and moved quietly to her bed.

She was asleep. The light from the window illuminated her face just enough to make her look like some kind of hideous monster, black and blue and swollen. She whimpered and moaned and he realized that was the sound that woke him.

Easing down beside her on the bed, he pulled her into his arms. She woke in a panic. Before she could scream he spoke quietly. "It's me, Bella. It's Mark. Shh, I'm here. You're safe."

Bella opened her eyes, peered up at him. "Mark?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm sorry I woke you, but you were restless and I thought I could comfort you a little. If you want me to leave..."

"No. Stay with me. Please."

In answer, he slid down until his head rested on a pillow. She rolled over to rest her head on his chest and he pulled the covers up over them both. "There now," he said softly. "That feels right, doesn't it? It's just where you belong."

She sighed. "Ummm, I can't tell you how it feels. It's kinda like a dream come true."

He didn't answer. He gently stroked her back, offering comfort and protection through his body language.

"Mark?"

"Yes."

"I never thought I'd be able to get out of the situation I was in. I thought I would be there for the rest of my life and then you came and suddenly everything has changed."

"Well, you know, your sister had a lot to do with that change. She loves you very much."

"I know. We used to be so close." She looked up. "I can't believe I'm here, lying in bed with you, feeling your arms around me. It seems so unreal."

"It's just the beginning, Bella. There's a long road we have to travel. I realize your actions made that road a little shorter, still, let's take each day as it comes. Otherwise, I may go crazy wanting you."

She was quiet as she thought about his words. "My actions?" she finally said. "I guess Joey talked to you?"

"He did."

"Are you angry with me?"

"I want to be. You put yourself in danger. Yet how can I be when I know why you did it?"

She nodded and shrugged. "I just couldn't stand waiting this out, wondering when he would finally go over the edge again and do his thing. So, I took matters into my own hands."

"I get that. Wish you had told me, though."

"Why? So you could talk me out of it? Or so you could warn Joey and he would keep it from happening? It had to be the way it was."

Sighing, Mark conceded. "You're right, I guess, but I want you to know that it kills me to see you like this. It kills me to know what he did to you and it makes a side of me you've never seen, want to come out."

"What side is that?"

"The vengeful side."

"Ooo, that sounds scary."

The way she said it made him laugh. "And just like that, you made it go away. You have a really good effect on me, Bella."

She smiled. "I'm glad. Mark, I just want to say, I did what I did not just to get me out of that situation and not just for Logan. I did it because I want to be with you. Because, I love you."

Mark hoped that was true, though maybe it was just because he was the first man to treat her like a woman in so long. He knew he'd jumped the gun Saturday night telling her he loves her. So, now come the consequences. The not knowing. He'd been taught self-discipline his entire life. He'd adhered to it strictly after the episode with Beth, until now. He also believed that what he felt with Bella was good and natural and he couldn't bring himself to say that he shouldn't have told her that he loves her.

He looked down at her as she lay on his chest. Gently, he kissed her forehead. "I love you too, Bella," he whispered. She didn't respond. She was sound asleep.

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Joey backed silently out of Breez's room, pulling the door closed as quietly as he could. He turned in the hallway to see Mark exiting Bella's room in exactly the same way.

Mark turned, saw Joey. They both smiled.

"I'll make coffee if you make breakfast," Mark whispered.

"Deal." Joey looked at his watch. "What time do you need to wake Logan?" he asked as they walked downstairs.

"He's got about thirty more minutes to sleep. I'll drop him off at school on my way home. I have to get a quick shower and get dressed. Have to see a judge, hopefully first thing this morning. Justin is arranging it."

"A family court kind of judge?"

"Yep. Need to get Bella temporary custody of Logan."

In the kitchen, Joey reached up into a cabinet and pulled down the coffee, shoved it at Mark who began filling the carafe with water.

Joey rummaged through the refrigerator and cabinets until he found what he wanted. As he measured milk and flour into a bowl he nodded at Mark. "I'll be in court myself this morning. Jason wants me to be there in case there is any question about what happened."

Mark shook his head. "In a bond hearing I doubt the judge will ask you any questions."

Joey shrugged. "I guess Jason wants to cover bases."

While the coffee dripped, Mark found two mugs. He watched as Joey beat a couple of eggs into the mixture. "You makin' pancakes?"

"Yep. Got a problem with that?"

"None whatsoever. So, whaddya think about this thing?"

"Which thing are we talkin' about?" Joey asked.

"I think you know."

"You mean like, us brothers dating sisters?"

Mark nodded. "Dating isn't exactly the word, but we can settle for that for the sake of this conversation."

Joey frowned as he tested the skillet to make sure it was hot enough. "No, let's don't settle. Let's call it what it is. I'm in love with Breez, you're in love with Bella. You've known Bella longer than I've

known Breez but it is what it is. They're a lot alike and so are we. It's interesting to say the least."

Mark nodded. "To say the very least. I'm amazed at how strongly I feel about Bella and I won't question the strength of your feelings for Breez. So, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Joey smiled. "What? That this is it? That we're gonna settle down and marry the Sheridan sisters?"

Mark nodded as he watched Joey turn golden brown pancakes over in the skillet. "It seems that's where *my* mind is at. I know with me and Bella, we have some hurdles to jump first. Bottom line, I want her. I've never felt this way about anyone. Not ever. Not even about Amelia," Mark said, thinking about his college girlfriend of three years. "I can't even imagine being without Bella, and I want to be a father to Logan."

"Yeah, poor kid, he deserves a break."

Mark poured the coffee, set a mug next to Joey. "I *did* want to have more kids, though."

"Did? What do you mean?"

"Bella can't have any more children. The jerk forced her to get her tubes tied."

"That can be undone."

"Yeah, I'm gonna talk to Jeffy about it."

"She'll know."

"Yep," Mark agreed as he poured syrup over his stack, cut in, took a bite, and gave himself a moment to savor. "So, has Breez told you yet how she feels about all this?"

Joey shook his head. "She isn't sure yet how she feels about all this." He shrugged. "She doesn't realize that she loves me yet."

"What are you gonna do to convince her?"

"Nothing. She'll figure it out. She's a smart girl."

Mark smiled. He'd always appreciated his little brother's confidence. He noticed the TV built into the front of one of the cabinets and turned it on. "Let's see if Gordy made the news."

Joey nodded and they watched the news for only a few minutes before the story aired.

They reported that Gordon Landow, a prominent Los Angeles criminal defense attorney, was arrested last night for felony assault against his wife of twelve years. "Mr. Landow," the reporter went on to say, "is expected in court this morning for a bond hearing. Also

expected in court this morning is former actor turned security agent, Joey Adams."

Joey cursed softly. "How'd they get that information?"

"That you're a former actor?"

"No, that I'm gonna be in court this morning."

"Mr. Adams, who is the brother of Breanna Adams and step-brother to Ricky Kino, is best known as the current Kino Challenge champion. He was on scene last night when the assault took place and was the one who actually pulled Mr. Landow away from his wife. He then cuffed the attorney and called the police."

"Geez, are they reporting the crime or doing a bit for the National Enquirer?" Mark snapped.

Joey turned it off. "And people wonder why I got out of showbiz."

Mark glanced at his watch. "Thanks for breakfast, Joey. I gotta go wake Logan and check in on Bella before I go."

"No problem. I'll make enough for everyone else. Let them know. Then I gotta get too."

"I'll check in with you at the courthouse."

Joey gave a small salute. "See you there."

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"Logan didn't seem to be terribly upset this morning, did he?" Breez asked as she leaned against the kitchen counter drinking coffee, watching Joey cook pancakes for her.

"I think he sees the hope in the situation. He's a good kid. A strong kid." Joey placed a stack on a plate and carried it to her, moved close, rubbed his knuckles over her cheek. "Reminds me a lot of his aunt."

Breez smiled up at him, accepted the plate. "Umm, smells good."

He lowered his head to her neck just below her ear. "Sure does."

She remained still, allowing him to nibble on her skin. "Wow, Joey, you're the only one who can do that," she finally said.

"Do what?"

"Distract me from food."

He smiled, backed away. "That should tell you something."

"It tells me you're very, very good."

Smiling, he moved away, ushered her to a chair. "Sit. Eat. I have to run upstairs, shower and dress."

"I saw you brought a suit back with you. Got somewhere special to go this morning?"

"Court."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "Oh!"

Joey looked behind him. Bella stumbled into the kitchen. He reached out to steady her as Breez sprang from her chair to do the same.

"I'm okay," Bella said quickly. "Just a little dizzy. Breez sit back down and eat."

Joey eased her down into a chair. He'd seen plenty of bashed in faces in his line of work, but this one tore him apart. He shook his head.

"Looks pretty bad, doesn't it?" Bella said.

Joey nodded. "It does. But when the swelling goes down it'll make a big difference. Don't worry. You will heal."

"I'm not worried. I know it will heal. It's healed before. The body is an amazing thing." She glanced at her sister. "Eat Breez. I'm okay."

"Can I get you some breakfast?" Joey asked.

She shook her head. "I think I'm a little too sore to chew food. Maybe just some juice."

Joey's lips pressed tightly together. "You need nourishment. Let me make you a very thin protein shake. It will be easy to get down."

Bella gave what Joey took to be a smile. "If you insist," she said.

"I do."

It took Joey only a few minutes to serve Bella. He then showered and dressed and came down to wrap his arms around Breez as she stood at the sink doing up the dishes.

"I'll check in with you later."

Breez leaned back against him. "Thanks for everything, Joey. It's actually pretty nice to have someone I can depend on, even if it is because I'm paying you."

"You have me to depend on for many reasons, Breez. Being paid isn't one of them. It may be what started it, but not now. From here on out, I'm here for you because you and me are not finished. Not by a long shot. So get used to the idea."

Placing a finger under her chin he turned her head and placed a soft kiss on her mouth. Turning, he smiled at Bella. "Take care. I guess Mark has told you he'll call as soon as he speaks with the judge this morning."

Bella nodded. "I admit, I'm pretty anxious to get that call."

"Everything's gonna be okay. Keep that thought in mind." He nodded at Breez. "Keep the security system on."

She nodded and watched as he left. Breez turned and smiled at her. Bella tried to smile back. "He's quite a guy," she said.

Breez wrinkled her nose, gave a shrug. "I guess. He's cocky."

"He's in love with you, Breez."

"Yeah, I think he thinks he is. I mean, he's made it pretty clear that he has strong feelings, but we hardly know each other."

"Some men know their minds and hearts pretty well and he strikes me as one who does."

Breez frowned. "I guess."

"You don't feel anything for him?" Bella asked.

"I do, but..."

"But what?"

"I don't know. He, he's so perfect, you know. He's strong. He's gorgeous. He's funny. He's interesting. He's even famous."

"And he cooks," Bella added.

"Exactly," Breez said, her eyebrows raised.

"All horrible things," Bella said, her eyes dancing.

Breez frowned. "I forgot how funny you can be, sis."

Bella grinned. "You know what I think?"

"No, please enlighten me," Breez said as she sat down at the breakfast table across from her sister.

"I think Joey Adams scares you."

"Not in the least."

"Breez, so, I know I haven't been very much of a sister to you these past years. I know I haven't been around for you, but I feel like I do still know my little sister. I know how strong you love. I know how much losing Mom and Dad hurt you and I think your feelings for Mr. Perfect are so strong that it scares you. Maybe you're afraid he won't love you as much as you do him. Or maybe you're afraid it won't last. Maybe you're afraid something will happen to him since he works such a dangerous job, or maybe, maybe you're afraid he'll turn into a monster like your sister's husband."

"And then maybe I just don't want to get serious."

"It's too late for that. I can see that at a glance," Bella said.

Breez shook her head. "No, he's just fun to be with, that's all."

"Maybe it's because he's so strong you feel he might dominate

you," Bella went on as if Breez hadn't said a thing. "I can tell you right now that you are just as strong. Life with you two would never be boring. How wonderful is it that you and I end up with brothers? We can see each other every day. We can play tennis together again. Doubles! We can go on double dates. You can be a part of your nephew's life. We'll have big family cookouts on July 4th, and we'll spend Christmas together with their giant family, probably at Grandmaster Kino's home. Oh, it's gonna be so wonderful!"

Breez smiled at her sister. She didn't tell her that her words scared her. Not for herself, but for her sister. Of course, it's possible that things could turn out just as she described. It's obvious that Bella was deeply in love with Mark and expected to marry him once she was free of Gordon. Her sister, though older, seemed so very young and naive at the moment and it frightened Breez. She didn't want Bella to ever be hurt again. Not in any way.

"Breez, just tell me you'll give the poor guy the benefit of the doubt," Bella said.

Breez let out a breath. "I promise."

Bella smiled sweetly at her sister. "Breez, there's something I have to say to you."

"You mean even more than what you've already said?" Breez asked with a smile.

Bella nodded seriously. "I need to say 'thanks'."

"No, you don't."

"Please. Just let me say it. I should've said it the other day when you told me you'd gone to Ameritech and hired them to protect me. I didn't because I was a little miffed about being spied on. But, Breez, to do what you did, the love and care you've shown by doing that, I'm humbled by it. So, I want you to know how grateful I am that I have a little sister who would go to such lengths to help me, to protect me."

"I love you, Bella."

"And I love you too, Breez. I can't wait for us to be able to spend time together."

Breez hid her consternation. "Me neither," she said with a smile. "Now, whaddya say to us getting comfortable in the family room on the big, old sofa and get caught up, look at pictures of our childhood and maybe even have a good cry."

"Sounds good, all but that last part, because I'm done crying."

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"The judge is Judge Hovan. Unfortunately he's covered up this morning in court but he said he would work you in at noon, so have all the paperwork ready to present and don't be late," Justin said.

Mark nodded. "Thanks. I'll be ready. I can't let Bella down." He started out of the office but stopped when Justin spoke.

"How's she doing?"

Mark shook his head. "Mentally and emotionally she seems to be surprisingly okay. Physically, I can't believe how bad it looks. Her face is so swollen."

"Can she speak clearly?"

"Yes, at least there's that."

"Well, your mother couldn't."

"Mom?"

"Back when you were a kid and James Crane got to her while you were away at your Dad's for Christmas."

Mark remembered the stories. He'd never actually seen how badly his mother had been beaten.

"Jason says Gordon hit Bella hard, but only twice. James hit your mother over a dozen times. He beat her senseless. Her eyes swelled shut. He busted open a place on her cheekbone and they had to stitch her up. Her lips were so swollen her top lip actually touched her nose. She couldn't speak, couldn't form the words with her mouth."

Mark stood frozen, thinking about how Bella had looked this morning and how much worse someone had done his own mother. The thought of his mother going through something like that– he felt no shame when his eyes moistened.

Justin nodded. "Yeah, I know, but I'm just saying that it could've been worse. Much worse."

"Did Eric, I mean, I'm sure he wanted to kill the guy."

Justin nodded. "Eric struggled for a long time with the need for revenge. It was a difficult time to say the least."

Mark nodded. "And he got that revenge."

Justin shook his head. "No, Eric had to let go of that need. When the time came, it wasn't revenge. It was survival."

"My mother's survival."

"Correct."

"Thanks, Justin. I think I understand so much more now about that

time in my mother's life. And I think I need to tell Eric just how much I appreciate his taking care of Mom."

Justin smiled. "Gratefulness is always a good thing."

Mark left the office and immediately called Bella.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm a little tired but I'm okay. Breez and I have been talking and reminiscing all morning. So, I'm afraid to ask, how did things go with the judge?"

"He can't see me until noon. I promise the moment I have the custody order in my hand I'll let you know."

"Okay. And you're sure you can get it."

"I'm sure."

Bella drew a calming breath.

"Sweetheart, your body needs rest to heal. Why don't you take a nap and by the time you wake up I'll have the order."

"That's the same thing Breez has been saying. I guess that's what I'll do."

"Good. You sleep and stop worrying."

"Yes, sir," she said with a laugh. "Bye."

"Bye my love." He hung up.

Bella smiled at his last words. 'My love.' She glanced over at her sister who was smiling at her. "What?"

Breez shrugged. "Nothing. Just like seeing you smile. So, did he get the order?"

"The judge isn't available until noon. Mark told me to rest and he would call when he had the order."

"That's a good idea. You go take a nap. If you think you'll be okay, I'm gonna go shopping, pick up some things for you and Logan and by then it will be time to pick Logan up from school."

"I'll be fine."

"I'll lock up tight and turn on the security alarm. Ameritech has someone watching the house and Joey says he's gonna swing by to check on us but I'm sure he won't wake you."

"Go shop. I'm going up to bed."

Once Breez left, Bella made her way up the stairs. She went into the bathroom to freshen up, trying not to look at her reflection in the mirror. Earlier this morning she'd been surprised by how bad it looked. She didn't care to see again.

She climbed into bed and laid her cell phone beside her on the night table. Snuggling down under the covers, she drifted off. It seemed she'd only been asleep a few minutes when the phone rang. She sat up quickly, grabbed the phone, looked at the caller ID. Gordon.

Hands shaking, she set the phone down, stared at it until the ringing stopped. The fear was back. Why is he calling her? Mark said there would be a restraining order. Of course, he wouldn't care about that, but he wouldn't want to go back to jail. All she'd have to do is call Joey and tell him Gordon had tried to call her. She was contemplating doing just that when the phone rang again.

She grabbed it, stared at the caller ID. Gordon. She put the phone down again, climbed out of bed and began to pace. What should she do? Should she answer and see what he has to say? No. She won't talk to him and give him the satisfaction of gloating over what he'd done to her.

Maybe she should call Mark, but then he might do something crazy and get himself into trouble. Only, Mark *was* pretty level-headed, she argued with herself. Though he did say something last night about his vengeful side. Okay, then, maybe she would call Joey. She sat on the side of the bed and picked up the phone. It rang again. Gasping, she looked at the caller I.D. Gordon again. She set the phone down quickly as if he could reach through it. She realized she was crying. She'd thought she was being so strong, but now she was falling apart. She felt her stomach heave and she flew to the bathroom just in time to be sick. She rinsed her mouth, washed her face and by the time she came back into the bedroom the phone was ringing again.

Ignoring it, she quickly got dressed in the clothes Breez had given her. The phone continued to ring. She paced back and forth trying to decide what to do and the phone continued to ring. Don't let him scare you, she told herself over and over again as the phone continued to ring. Not answering was being afraid. He can't reach through the phone and hurt her. Whatever he had to say couldn't hurt her.

After thirty minutes of indecision, she couldn't take any more. She ran toward the night table and grabbed up the phone. "What?" she yelled into the receiver.

There was a moment of silence before he spoke and when he did it was in that disgustingly quiet voice he liked to use that she hated so much. "I think you're gonna want to hear what I have to say."

"I doubt that."

"I want you to come home, Bella. I promise I won't hurt you."

She laughed. "Are you kidding me? Have you lost your mind?"

"Not hardly. Look, I know things got out of hand, but I'm actually doing you a favor now. I'm offering to let you come home and live here with me and Logan."

Her stomach dropped. "Logan and I are not coming to live with you. You're insane."

"Be careful, Bella or I'll withdraw the offer. Now, before you say something else, I think you should know that I already have temporary custody of Logan."

"Liar. That's not true. You are a liar," Bella cried as the fear took over. "That can't be true."

"I assure you it is true and I'm kindly giving you the opportunity to come home and be a mother to your son."

"No, Gordon, Mark is seeing a judge in just a few hours and he's going to give me custody."

Gordon gave a soft chuckle. "Mark, is it? No matter. You see, Judge Latham is a good friend of mine. He had the order of custody ready for me by the time I walked out of jail this morning. Your 'Mark' is too late. It's already done."

"How can a judge give you custody after what you did to me?"

"Like I said, he's a friend of mine. Besides, Bella, you know you provoked me. It was as if you were doing everything you could to make me angry and I simply obliged you."

"No. This can't be true. You're lying."

"I have the order in my hand all neatly signed and sealed by Judge Latham. And so there are two nice police officers who have been assigned to escort Logan home from school today, since I felt there might be a little resistance."

Bella choked on the tears that were now free flowing. "Please."

"So you see my dear, I'm actually being generous. I could make it so you'd never see your son again, but I'm offering to let bygones be bygones and asking you to come home. I will allow you to live in my home and be a mother to your son. But you must come home now or the deal is off."

"Gordon, please, please don't do this," she cried.

"Don't do what? Don't give you the chance to put everything

right?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Bella, you are my wife. I'm sorry things got so ugly last night. Truly I'm sorry, but it's time to forget about that and I'll forget about the fact that you allowed strangers to record our personal lives. I'll forget about the fact that you tried to provoke me into attacking you so that you could plot to take my son from me and I'll forget about the fact that I think you're having an affair with your attorney."

Bella gasped.

"What?" Gordon continued sarcastically. "No denial?"

"You're turning everything all around. You're the one who has continually abused me for years and you're the one having an affair. I have proof of it."

Gordon shrugged. "So what? It happens when a wife denies her husband his conjugal rights."

"That's not how it is and you know it. Gordon, please..."

"Last chance, Bella. Hang up the phone, and look out the window. You'll see a taxi drive up in just a few minutes. When it does, I suggest you get yourself in that car and come home. It's your only chance to stay with your son. I guess the question is, do you love him enough?"

Bella closed her eyes. Of course she loved Logan enough. Nothing turned out like she'd thought. Mark and Joey and Breez, everyone had said it's all gonna work out. Everything is gonna be okay. But it wasn't okay, was it? Everything had gone to hell.

"Well?"

"Gordon, please," she cried.

"Last chance," he said calmly.

She drew a breath. "I'm coming," she whispered.

"Not so stupid after all," Gordon said before he hung up.

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Mark blinked. "Excuse me, Your Honor?"

Judge Hovan clicked more keys, stared at the computer screen, shook his head with a sigh. "Judge Latham issued an order of temporary custody of Logan Landow to his father, Gordon Landow about nine this morning." He looked up. "I'm sorry. Right now the best you can do is appeal the order."

"I will. Tell me, how can a judge give custody of a kid to a man who just got out of jail for beating up the kid's mother?'"

Judge Hovan sighed again. "Off the record, Mr. Adams, to me it appears that everything here is not as it should be. Judge Latham has been with the family court system for more than twenty years and he usually makes sound decisions. I don't know what's going on, but if he made that call because he's doing a favor for a friend, then Judge Latham is putting his career on the line. I don't think he would do that unless there was something more going on than meets the eye."

Mark listened hard, trying to read between the lines. Was Judge Hovan saying that Latham was crooked? He tried hard to decipher. None of it made any sense. He would have to conference with Justin and Jason and Joey and even Eric. Why would a judge put his career on the line for a friend? And what kind of friend would ask him to? Of course, Gordon was no one's friend but his own.

Mark looked back up at the judge. He offered his hand. "Thank you, sir, for your time."

The judge nodded. "It's not over, counselor. Do your homework."

Mark nodded thoughtfully. "I will."

He turned and walked out into the corridor, running a hand through his hair. He dreaded calling Bella and telling her what happened. She's gonna freak. He pulled out his phone and turned it on. There was a text from Joey. *Call me ASAP*.

Mark had already met with Joey right after Gordon's bail hearing this morning. They'd discussed Gordon's demeanor which was not even close to repentant, and they'd made plans to get lunch together. Joey would have to wait. Bella came first. Only Bella's phone went straight to message, which meant she had it off. That was strange since she'd been anxious for his call. He tried once more and got the same. Maybe she'd turned it off so she could sleep. He'd try Breez but he didn't have her number, so Joey it is.

Joey's tone when he answered wasn't cheerful.

"Mark."

"Having a bad day, Joe. I need to call Breez and see why Bella isn't answering her phone."

Joey sighed. "Your day is about to get a whole lot worse. Jeff was watching the house for us while we were gone. About thirty minutes ago a cab drove up and Bella ran out and got in the cab. Jeff followed it to the Landow house. He let me know immediately. I hightailed it back to the Sheridan house and found a note from Bella."

Mark drew a calming breath. "Okay, so, what does it say?"

Joey held the note up to read. *"Dear Mark, I had no choice. By the time you read this you'll know Gordon got custody. He gave me a chance to come home and be with Logan. I couldn't let Logan face that monster alone. Don't be upset. I think Gordon knows about us. Don't call me and don't try to see me. It will only make things worse for us. I don't blame you. I know you tried. I will cherish the memories. I guess this is what I get for dreaming. Bella.*" Joey sighed. "From what I'm reading here, I take it you weren't able to get custody?"

"He beat me to it. He got some judge friend of his in family court to issue the custody order. I'm gonna start an appeal and then I need to have a family conference."

Joey nodded. "Name the time and we'll be there."

"Thanks. So, where was Breez when all this was happening?"

"She went to pick up some things for Bella and Logan and then she was supposed to pick Logan up from school. Why? Lookin' for someone to be mad at?"

Mark closed his eyes. Tried to calm himself. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Mark, I know you feel like ripping something apart, but you gotta hold it together right now. Listen, why don't you meet me at the gym and if you want to beat on somebody I'll accommodate you."

"Yeah?" Mark said. "The way I'm feeling, I don't think you wanna take me on right now."

"Oh, geez, I'm shakin' in my boots. Tell you what, big boy, you just tried to pin your mad on my girl. I'm all too happy to kick your butt. See you there in thirty minutes." He hung up.

Mark almost threw his phone. Instead he hurried back to his office to take care of a few matters. He didn't want to be late.

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Gordon opened the door for Bella upon her arrival. She held her head high as she passed him.

"Please, come in," he said cordially. He led her into the front room, gestured toward the sofa and had her sit. "You'll have to excuse all the mess. I just had a crew over doing a search for surveillance equipment. It seems your little friend already retrieved his goodies."

She kept her mouth shut and her back straight as he looked her over.

"Goodness, I really did a job on you, didn't I?"

She glared at him. He offered a sheepish smile.

"I'm sorry, Bella. Really. Sometimes I don't know what comes over me. I truly am sorry. Well, you won't be able to show your face for a while, huh?"

She didn't answer. Looking at him, she tried to see what the world sees when they look at him. Blond and blue-eyed, he came across as an angel. He was slim, fit, personable. Everyone liked him. He was a people magnet. Only some saw through him and those who did were the ones who'd seen him lose his temper. That used to be only a few, but he was getting more and more bold about letting it show. Or was it just getting harder and harder for him to control it? He waved his hand at her and she flinched.

"Bella, will you please relax. I'm not gonna hurt you. I was just getting your attention. It seemed you drifted off into another world. They must have you on some pain pills."

She nodded.

"You know, all this is kind of a good thing."

She blinked up at him. "How could you say that?" she asked, her teeth clamped tightly together.

He brushed his hand over her hair. She tried to shrug it off and he grabbed her chin. "Bella, just calm down. I swear I'm not gonna hurt you. Just don't push me away. After all, you're my wife and I'm your husband. If you live with me in my home, you will at the very least be cordial. Now, as I was saying, all this is a good thing because everything is out in the open. There are no more pretenses. I know you want out and you know you have to stay in order to be with Logan. You know I'm having an affair, so I no longer have to hide it, and I know you wish you were back in your lover's arms."

Bella's eyes filled with tears.

He watched her a moment. "So, I'm wondering, Bella, just how long has that been going on? Huh? How long have you been pulling the wool over my eyes?"

Bella sniffed, shook her head. She knew better. She was too wary of him to fall complacent. "You're wrong about that, Gordon. Oh, you're right, I wish Mark and I were lovers— but we're not. It was a dream. A silly unfulfilled dream."

Gordon frowned. "How sad then. For you, that is. But better for him, I guess. I really have no reason to retaliate now, do I?"

Bella kept her face carefully blank.

"Anyway, you're gonna see that it won't be so bad living here with me and your son. And I'll prove it to you right now. First, it's obvious you're in no condition to do any housework or cooking. I want you to take a whole week and just rest. Pamper yourself. Logan and I will make do. Then, if you feel like it, you can start on things next week."

Bella suddenly realized that it was important to Gordon, for some reason, that they at least appear as husband and wife, important enough that he was making an effort to make sure she stayed. She wondered if it was a simple matter of pride, or if there was some other reason. Could it be that she had him over some kind of barrel? She made a quick decision to push the boundaries, looked up at him fiercely. "I'm gonna make a few demands of my own."

She waited for his snide remark and when it didn't come she knew she was right.

Instead of arguing with her, he smiled. "I swear, Bella, I think I like this new feisty you. Very well, what demands would you like to make?"

She couldn't believe his response. It was too easy. Still, she decided she was about to test her power. "I want separate bedrooms."

"You are my wife."

"In name only as you stated yourself a minute ago. I will live in your home, I will take care of your home, cook and clean and play hostess when you need me to and I will take care of our son, but that is as far as my wifely duties will go."

He shrugged as if he couldn't care less about it. "Fine with me. Have your own room. Anything else?" he asked generously.

"Yes. I want you to allow Logan to have friends. I want him to be able to go out and do things with kids his own age. He wants to play ball. He wants to go to school activities. He needs some freedom."

Gordon nodded. "Done. See, Bella? I can be reasonable."

"That remains to be seen. One more thing."

"Yes?"

"Don't ever hit me again."

He smiled. "Don't ever make me hit you again."

It was supposed to be a joke, but Bella knew better. She didn't buy this new Gordon. She knew him too well. At least she felt as if she'd bought her and Logan some time before the cycle began again.

"Well now, you look tired, Bella. Why don't you go along upstairs and get some rest."

She rose and grabbed her purse. "I think I will."

Slowly, she climbed the stairs. She suddenly felt so tired. So tired. All she wanted to do was lie down and sleep– and never wake up. She stopped suddenly, drew a sharp breath. The thought shocked her. That's not what she wanted. She didn't want to die. She was tired. That's all. She wanted to be here for Logan. She was grateful to be here for Logan. He's gonna be confused and upset when he gets home today, she thought. I need to set the alarm on my cell phone, make sure I'm downstairs when he comes through the door.

She moved upstairs to the landing and tried to decide which room she should take. It seemed to be almost overwhelming, a huge decision, but she finally decided to take a room at the front of the house, next to Logan's bedroom, at the opposite end of the hall from Gordon's room.

She opened the door, moved forward and sat on the edge of the bed. Dazed, she looked around the room, seeing it for the first time from a guest's point of view.

It was done mostly in neutrals, beige, browns, a touch of soft green. It was bland, she admitted, though the only thing she really cared about was it was her own room. Brows knitted, she realized she'd never had her own room. Never. Well, maybe for the first four years of her life before Breez had been born.

She'd always shared a room with her sister. Even though they could have elected to have separate rooms as teenagers, they had elected to share. Her little sister had never bugged her like she'd heard so often from her friends. She'd been a source of laughter, of camaraderie, a confidant, her best friend. Bella's mind went briefly to the conversation they'd had earlier today, but she stood abruptly, wiping the thoughts– and dreams– from her mind.

Deciding to take care of the business at hand, she went back down the hall to the room she'd shared with Gordon, thinking to collect a few of her personal things from the bathroom. She glanced around the bedroom, trying not to think of the atrocities that had been committed against her in that room. Quickly she moved through to the bathroom and what she saw took her breath away.

Makeup, powders, lotions, shampoos, anything belonging to her had been dumped in the sink or tub, on the counters and floor. A

broken perfume bottle crunched under her foot. The mirror over the sink was broken, a dent right in the middle and she imagined it was Gordon's fist that might have made that impression. Her body began to tremble. He hadn't fooled her. He was as dangerous as he'd ever been. The evidence of that was right here in front of her.

She sniffed as she realized the tears were flowing down her face. How was she to survive? What would become of Logan if Gordon, in one of his fits, actually kills her?

Her mind went to Mark and what he must be going through at this very minute. She was sure he was in anguish. He loved her. She knew that. And he was powerless to help her. She'd dreamed of being his wife. Of having a life, a real life, with happy family times, being in love, being safe, feeling secure. All that was gone. And if she felt this way, what will Logan be feeling? She had to do all she could to make sure he didn't lose hope. She couldn't let him get depressed and that meant she couldn't let herself get depressed. She had to pretend there was still hope for Logan's sake. She had to show him that life won't always be bad.

When hands gripped her shoulders, she gasped.

"Sorry," Gordon said. "Didn't mean to startle you. I guess you see that I had a little tantrum. I apologize for that. If you'll make me a list of things, I'll replace what you need."

Bella sniffed, wiped her cheeks. "That won't be necessary. I'll get them myself."

Gordon sighed. "I really don't want you going out in public right now. I insist you let me get them for you," he said pointedly.

Her eyes met his in the mirror. The nightmare continued. But she knew to choose her battles. "Fine. I'll make a list." She moved from his reach. "I'll get the rest of my things later."

Before he could answer, she hurried back to the room she'd claimed. She locked the door behind her, took off her clothes and buried herself under the covers where she allowed herself one last good cry. After that, she would make the very best of this situation or die trying. And she knew that was a distinct possibility.

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Joey helped Mark place the bench bar back in its cradle. Mark's last max had been three hundred fifteen. Today, he was working out with three hundred and pushing it as hard as he could. Their plan was

to work to failure which should keep them from killing each other when they faced off on the mats, which in this particular studio, was a ring.

"Hey," Joey began, "what if I just go pick Logan up from school and take him somewhere? We can say I didn't know about the custody order," Joey suggested.

Breathing hard, Mark sat up, wiped his brow with a towel. "Gordon went to the trouble of getting the order. He's not gonna let that happen. I'm sure he's arranged for an escort."

Joey hadn't been serious, but knew making ridiculous statements might lighten Mark's mood. Apparently not yet. He shrugged. "Well, then how about if I just happen to run into Gordon in a public place and pick a fight. Even if I get arrested, it will be worth it to be able to plant my fist in his face."

Mark stood as Joey took his place on the bench. "You had your opportunity last night, bro. You blew it."

"Hey, I was on camera," Joey said.

"Excuses."

Joey hefted the bar, counted off four and shook his head. Mark quickly helped lift the bar and place it on the supports.

"I'm done," Joey said.

Mark nodded. "Me too. Let's do this."

The gym where they worked out was one of the many fitness/martial arts centers owned by the Kinos. This particular one was large, high-end, and very popular, located in West Lake. Mark and Joey moved toward the main ring where a couple of guys were sparring. They watched for a few minutes as they waited to take the ring.

The guys sparring needed some instruction, but Mark was in no mood. Joey, on the other hand, felt the need to interject. After all, he was part of the Kino family and these guys were in a Kino facility and Joey felt he needed to represent.

When Joey climbed into the ring, Mark only shook his head. There were immediate bows, handshakes, smiles. Joey had been proving himself for years at the Kino challenges and was well-known in the Kino studios. Joey spoke to the two men, pointed out some of the major flaws he'd immediately seen. Discussed the lack of speed and therefore the lack of fitness. Demonstrated on first one man and then the other. By the time the fifteen-minute lesson was complete, they'd

drawn a crowd.

When 7th dan Joey Adams, offered to demonstrate on his brother, 5th dan Mark Adams, what he'd just been talking about there was a big round of applause. Rolling his eyes, Mark climbed into the ring while the other two climbed out.

"Master Bridger," Joey called, getting the attention of the Master who taught at this school.

The man came quickly. "You two gonna slug it out?" he asked.

"We are. Thought you might want to ref since my brother here is in a killing mood."

Master Bridger looked Mark over, his eyebrows raised. "Okay, but what I say goes," he finally said.

Mark only nodded.

"No headgear?" the man asked Joey.

"What for?" Joey said with a grin. "He won't get in a punch."

There was a smattering of laughter from the onlookers. Mark's eyes narrowed. They squared off and Master Bridger gave the command. "Seijak." Begin.

The crowd of about thirty, pretty much everyone who'd been in the gym at the time, had been rowdy and excited before they'd begun to fight. Now the crowd stood in awed silence. Most of them had seen Joey fight in the Kino challenges. All of them had seen Ricky Kino in action. Still, seeing what they were witnessing in person was enough to cause renewed reverence and respect.

The two warriors in the ring moved almost faster than the eye could follow. They were the personification of what the martial arts was all about. They fought with honor and respect for each other. They pulled no punches. They blocked with perfection. Strikes and kicks were delivered with flawless execution. In the first five minutes of the match, not one blow had landed.

"Stop," Master Bridger commanded when time ran out. "Relax."

They did as instructed, bowing first to Master Bridger. The crowd's buzz immediately became deafening. After a minute Master Bridger brought them together again and ordered them to begin.

This time, right out of the gate, Mark connected with Joey's eye. The crowd gasped, held their breath momentarily, waiting to see Joey's reaction. He didn't disappoint them. He recovered quickly and came at Mark in retaliation, finally connecting with a spinning hook into

Mark's abdomen, knocking him off his feet.

Mark rolled to his feet, countered, blocked, countered. Joey did the same. Mark connected a few more times, catching Joey in the shoulder, the diaphragm, and again in the eye. Joey did just as much damage, bloodying Mark's nose, a glancing blow to the head and finally sweeping the leg and sending Mark down.

Joey moved in for the kill, his knife-hand stopping just short of Mark's Adam's apple. However, Mark's hand moved in place to block just in time. He wrapped his hand around Joey's fist.

The crowd broke into cheers. Master Bridger called it a tie and ended the fight. Joey stood, helped Mark up. Mark grabbed a towel and held it to his bloody nose.

"Sorry about that," Joey said, giving his brother a sheepish smile.

"Apologize for fighting well and I'll have to kick your butt all over again," Mark said.

"Again? You have to do it in the first place in order to do it again," Joey said with a grin as he wrapped his arm around his brother's neck and squeezed.

Mark mussed Joey's hair. "Thanks, bro."

"Hey– anytime."

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"Mom?"

Bella opened her eyes, blinked several times.

"Mom, are you okay?"

She quickly remembered where she was. "Logan." She reached out toward him and he came to her, sat beside her on the bed.

"Logan, I'm sorry, I meant to be up by the time you got here."

"It's okay, Mom. It's okay."

"Logan, I'm so sorry this is happening, but you have to believe me that somehow things are gonna work out. We've just had a little setback. It's not over. All is not lost."

"Master Mark, he wasn't able to get you custody, was he?"

"No. Not yet. But I'm sure he's working on it."

Logan looked away, tried to blink back the tears that threatened.

"Oh, Logan," Bella said softly. "I'll be here for you. We'll get through this."

"You were out," Logan said. "You were finally out and now you're back here because of me. I know it's because of me."

"No, sweetheart. Don't think of it that way."

"Stop, Mom. I understand what's going on. Don't you know that I'd rather live without seeing you and know that you're safe?"

Bella smiled at her very grown up son. "Oh, Logan, if you want me to understand that, then you have to understand that I'd rather face a little danger than allow you to grow up without me around. You're my son and I love you with every fiber of my being."

"I love you too, Mom."

She hugged him, stroked his hair. "Was it awful to get out of school and find you had to come back here?"

He took a moment to answer. "I knew it could happen. I almost expected it, so it wasn't such a big surprise. I knew he wouldn't just let us get away."

"What did he say to you when you got home?"

"He said he was sorry. That things were gonna be different around here. He said he was gonna let me see friends, do some stuff. He said he knew I didn't believe him but he would show me."

Bella sighed. "Maybe he's telling the truth."

"Good grief, Mom, don't tell me you're falling for his lies."

Bella blew out a patient breath. "No, Logan, I'm not. I'm just trying to be strong for your sake, but it appears there's no need for that." Smiling with pride, she took his hand. "Logan, promise me you won't do anything to antagonize your father."

"Have I ever?"

"No, but I know you're angry now. Just go along with whatever he asks. That's the best way to handle things."

He was quiet a moment. "If that's what you want, I mean, if it will make things easier for you, I'll do it."

"That's what I want."

They both turned at the knock on the door.

Gordon poked his head in. "Sorry to interrupt, but I told your mom to get some rest so I thought maybe you and me should go out to eat. How does Clint's Steakhouse sound?"

Logan had no desire to go out to eat with his father and he started to say so. The last time he'd been out to eat with his dad had been Logan's ninth birthday. During dinner his mom had differed in opinion on how well the server had treated them. In the car on the way home his father had backhanded her in the mouth. She hadn't expected it.

He'd surprised her. Logan thought it was the element of surprise that was his father's greatest weapon. It was the wondering, the anticipation that was so bad. No, he had no intention of going out to eat with his father, but it was the look in his mother's eyes that changed his mind. He shrugged nonchalantly. "I guess that would be okay."

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Psalm 37:1-2

"Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away."

Chapter Twelve

They each had a seat in the Kinos' large living room that looked more like a hotel lobby. Eric and Shelley sat on the center sofa with Jeffy on one side and Justin on the other. Jason and his wife, Angel, sat on the sofa that was closer to the front window along with Jeff Davis, one of Jason's top agents and a good friend of the family. Jeff's wife, Mickey, squeezed in next to him. Ricky, Bree, Joey and Breez occupied the third sofa. Young Eric and JoJo sat on the floor in front of their grandparents. Mark paced the room.

Justin's wife, Lori, with eight-year-old Taylor's help, had taken the young Davis boys to the TV room to try to keep them occupied. They'd begun the meeting with a prayer, asking for strength and guidance and healing in Jesus' name. Then Jason, Joey and Mark filled everyone in.

"Tell me again what Judge Hovan said to you," Eric said, his voice quiet, calm and commanding all at the same time.

Mark realized he took great comfort in the sound of that voice. He nodded in appreciation at his stepfather before he spoke. "He told me to do my homework. He said things were not as they seemed. He said that Judge Latham had been around a long time and that he found it difficult to believe that Latham would put his career on the line merely to do a favor for an acquaintance."

"Which means Judge Latham had a more pressing reason for making such a ruling," Justin said. "Something more important than merely doing a favor for a friend."

"Exactly," Jason replied.

"Making a ruling like that could definitely destroy his career," Eric continued. "So it has to be something that could be even worse than the destruction of his career."

"Or in addition to that," Joey added.

"What do you mean?" Shelley asked.

"In addition. Latham jeopardizes his own career, he must know that. So, he's not helping Landow out of the goodness of his heart.

Gordon has something on him. Something that will not only destroy his career but cause him some other kind of pain or discomfort."

"What would a man do to protect his family maybe?" Eric stated.

"Exactly. Or his reputation," Justin added.

"Well, we can speculate all we want," Mark began, "but bottom line, we need to find out. We need to investigate Judge Latham and see what he's trying to protect."

"That would fall to me," Jason said. "Or, us," he added, gesturing toward Joey and Jeff.

Shelley sighed. "Okay, so, you guys are saying that this Judge Latham gave an order of custody to Mr. Landow because he's trying to protect himself in some way, right? And that means he's probably being blackmailed by Gordon Landow?" Shelley asked. She sighed, shaking her head. "What could he be protecting himself from?"

"Remember when Mickey's stepfather, Senator Daley, had all those people working for him?" Jeff said. "They all did what they did to protect their families. It could be something like that."

"So this Judge Latham is either protecting his family, or protecting himself from something that Gordon Landow is holding over his head, am I correct?" Shelley asked.

Eric took Shelley's hand. "Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it, my love?"

Shelley nodded. "It's just amazing to me what people will do to keep from admitting their mistakes, and I believe that's what this is. I believe Judge Latham has made some kind of mistake and by keeping it a secret, he's giving Gordon power over him. It just seems so simple to me. You make a mistake, you admit it, take responsibility for it, you make amends and move on. Instead, he just digs a hole deeper and deeper. It will never end. If people would just take responsibility for their own decisions and their own actions."

Eric smiled, raised Shelley's hand to his lips and kissed it softly. "Well said, sweetheart."

"So, plan of action, we find out what Gordon is holding over Latham's head. Then what?" Mark asked Justin.

"Then we present it to Judge Hovan and bring it before an ethics committee. The original order will be thrown out and Logan will be remanded to his mother's care."

"So, Dad, do you think Mrs. Landow and Logan are okay right now?" JoJo asked.

Mark swallowed. “I don’t know, but I intend to go over there first thing in the morning after Gordon leaves and see for myself.”

“I don’t think you should do that,” Jeffy said suddenly.

If anyone else had said it Mark would’ve told them it was too bad what they thought, but because it came from his little sister Jeffy, he knelt down beside her.

“What is it, sis? Tell me what you see.”

She shook her head. “It’s hard to say. I mean, yesterday evening, I saw a fist coming at my face. I fell back in my chair. It felt as if I’d been hit. Yet when Dad asked me who the vision was about, I said ‘you’.”

Mark nodded his head. “Yeah, Mom called me to make sure I was okay. She told me you’d had a vision.”

Jeffy nodded with a frown. “But I was wrong, don’t you see? It was about Bella. I can’t seem to straighten out my feelings. It feels like a giant puzzle that I can’t figure out.”

“Honey, that’s not so hard,” Shelley said. “You know Mark. You’ve met Bella only once. And what happened to her affected Mark the most out of all of us, so of course you thought it was Mark,” Shelley said.

“Yeah, but the thing is, I still have this feeling. This awful feeling. I still think it’s Mark.”

Mark smiled at her. “You also know that I won’t curb what I have to do because I’m facing some sort of danger. I will promise though, that I’ll be careful.”

Jeffy smiled at him, placed her hands on either side of his face. “Let me feel your heart.”

He pulled away. “No.”

“Why?” she asked, tears in her eyes.

“It’s too much and there’s nothing you can do for it.”

“Maybe or maybe not, but please, Mark, let me see if I can pinpoint this feeling of impending doom.”

Sighing, Mark looked around at the attentive faces. Everyone was always interested when Jeffy wanted to do what he and Joey called her Vulcan mind melding trick. One of her strongest God-given abilities was that of an empath. She discovered one day as she pressed her forehead to that of her boyfriend that she could feel his emotions. At that particular time she’d discovered he was extremely sad. She’d come

home and tried it with everyone, over and over for days, weeks, whenever anyone would let her do it. It was like she had a new toy and she was obsessed with playing with it.

And then, everyone began to realize that when she did it, she actually altered the way they felt. If they were happy, it seemed she added to that and even better, if they were upset or sad, she could help to calm them or even cheer them. It seemed like a true miraculous talent, a gift. Of course, they knew that gift was from God. She was doing God's work. But then, Shelley began to realize that whenever Jeffy tried to help someone it took a toll on her daughter. It was as if she took their sadness into herself, so much that sometimes it made her sick. The result of that was most everyone refused Jeffy permission to 'read' them.

"I promise I won't try to make it better. I just want to see why your name keeps coming to my mind."

Mark looked up at his mother. Shelley nodded. Mark frowned.

"Fine, but I'm warning you, you won't like what you see."

Still kneeling in front of her he leaned close. Jeffy leaned forward, took his face in her hands and pressed her forehead against his. Immediately she gasped. Mark tried to pull away but she held him firm. He tried to let his mind go. To relax. He could feel extreme heat where their heads touched. He wondered what she was actually getting. Could she feel his broken heart? Could she feel his anger? Could she feel his intense worry over Bella and Logan? Or at this moment, his worry over his little sister, who was so unique, so special, love personified.

Finally, she pulled away. Tears poured down her cheeks. She stroked his cheek, leaned forward and kissed him. "I'm sorry, Mark," she whispered. "I'm so sorry for your pain."

He stood, walked away.

"Did you find out what you wanted?" Joey asked.

Jeffy shook her head. "No. But he IS in danger. That's all I know. I couldn't see anything else."

Breez leaned close to Joey. "You gotta fill me in on all this tonight."

"I will," he whispered.

"So," Breez said aloud. "That was very interesting, but here's the bottom line for me, I *want* Mark to check on Bella and I'm planning on going over there myself."

"Breez, I'd like you to stay out of it," Joey said quickly.

"I'd like to go over and speak to Bella too," Mickey said softly before Breez could respond to Joey.

"Uh, Mickey thought she might be of some help to Bella since she's been in a similar situation, stuck in a home with her abuser," Jeff put in.

"I think that would be a great idea," Eric said, smiling at Mickey.

Joey sighed. "Fine then, everyone go visit Bella. Just make sure you're not there when Gordon gets home."

"Well, I'm certainly not afraid of him," Mickey said.

Breez smiled. "Ooo, I like her." She turned to Joey. "I'm not afraid of him either."

"Yeah, well, me neither, but your presence could make things harder on Bella, so, visit, but only when Gordon's not home," Joey said, brows raised defiantly.

"Of course, you're right," Mickey agreed.

Joey smiled and nodded. "Anyway, Gordy's car is still bugged so we'll know where he is while you visit Bella."

"It is?" Jason asked.

Joey shrugged. "I thought maybe he wouldn't think about his car and apparently, I was right."

Mark turned to his stepbrother. "Ricky, we haven't heard anything from you. That's unusual."

Ricky shrugged. "Sorry. Anything I had to offer has already been said. I do have a question, though."

"Fire away."

"It's about the felony assault charges against Gordon, have they been dropped?"

"Not yet," Jason answered. "However, they will be dropped just as soon as they contact Bella and she informs them that she won't testify against her husband."

"And she won't testify because she's living with him," Mark added, the light going on. "She's had to make a deal with the devil, Gordon being that devil."

"Exactly. Obviously, he needed to get those charges dropped if he was gonna continue practicing law, and," Justin snapped his finger, "just like that. They're gone."

"Not for long," Mark vowed. "His troubles are just beginning if I

have anything to say about it."

Eric cleared his throat and the room quieted immediately. "Mark, I'd like you to put thoughts of vengeance aside. It's difficult, I know, but revenge serves no purpose. You've lost the battle, however, you will win the war."

Mark nodded and turned to look out the window.

The family rose and stood chatting. Shelley invited everyone into the kitchen for dessert. Joey went to Mark at the window.

"We'll get her out, Mark."

"I know. It's just the thought of her in that house, like some freakin' prisoner. It's making me crazy."

"A week from now, we'll have her out. A week. Hold on."

Jeffy wiggled her way in between her brothers. "Hey, you two."

Joey placed his arm around her shoulders. "Hey yourself, sweetie. Has anyone asked you how you're doing lately?"

"How I'm doing?"

"Yeah, I mean, since you and Cam broke up."

"*We* didn't break up. *He* broke up with *me*."

"Okay then, so, it sounds like you're over being sad and you've moved up to mad."

She shrugged. "Maybe. I just wish I could understand why he was so unhappy. I mean, it's not like we had a fight or anything like that."

"You two have been together for so long, maybe he felt he needed some space. You know, some time to, uh..."

"To be with other girls. I get it. So why does he need that and I don't need time to be with other guys?"

"That's not what I was gonna say. Listen, don't go crazy on me, sis, but I think you *do* need time to be with other people. I think this is a good thing."

She shook her head. "That's what Mom and Dad say too, but tell me this. If it's such a good thing, why does it hurt so much? Huh?"

"Growing pains, baby sister. Listen, whatever he said was the reason, don't take it personally, Jeffy. You're gorgeous, you're smart, you're sweet and you can kick butt. You're the ultimate female and if I weren't your brother, I'd ask you to marry me right now."

Jeffy giggled at the thought. "Thanks, Joey." She stood on her tiptoes and hugged him tight, but she jerked back so fast, Joey had to grab her to keep her from falling.

She looked up at him with startled wide eyes.

"What is it, Jeffy? Did you see something?"

"No. I didn't see anything. I felt pain. So much pain. Joey, I think maybe it's you." She looked over at Mark who'd been standing silently during the conversation. "Or, maybe it's both of you. Geez, I feel like I'm going crazy. These episodes, they're coming so fast, and I can't get a clear thought or image and if I can't do that, what good is it? Why do I have this thing when I can't use it to help anyone?" she cried. "I hate it. I just hate it. No wonder Cam left me. It's because I'm a freak." She broke away and ran up the steps.

Mark blew out a breath as he watched her go. "I guess we'd better go get Mom or Eric to handle it."

Joey nodded. "I'm with you."

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"There you are," Joey said from the doorway.

Breez didn't answer. She stood by the window in her studio, almost hidden behind the giant easel. Joey had almost missed her, but caught a glimpse of her reflection in the glass.

He moved silently into the room, glancing at sketches taped to a wall, at canvases leaning against another wall, at a high glass table filled with paints and palettes and the large window with no curtains. A single chair, deep and plush, sat in the corner opposite the window.

Moving up behind her, Joey placed his hands on Breez's shoulders. "I get that you might want to be alone, but I had to check, make sure you don't want a shoulder to cry on."

Breez allowed a small smile. He gets that she wants to be alone. A man as strong as him and he doesn't insist on crowding her. Instead, he gives her the room she needs to handle things but makes sure she knows he's there for her if she has need of him. Is there no end to his perfection? The thought wasn't comforting. It was disturbing.

She shrugged in answer to his question as she continued staring out the window, even though all she could see was her own reflection. Her mind was elsewhere. It was with her sister in that big, opulent house, a prisoner, of her own making maybe, but still, a prisoner.

And what about Logan? How did the poor kid handle being met at school by police and escorted back to the dungeon?

Joey kissed the top of her head. "We'll get them out."

"I just..." Her voice hitched. She couldn't control it. The tears

spilled over onto her cheeks, but she didn't turn and take him up on his offer. She wanted to but she didn't want to. To do so would be yielding herself to him, wouldn't it? It would be giving in to her need for him. And she didn't need any man.

When she didn't finish, Joey moved closer, ran his hands up and down her arms. "I understand how you feel," he said softly.

"I very much doubt that."

The bite in her words threw up the red flag for Joey. Suddenly aware that he was standing in a minefield and unsure of where he should step next, he tried to decide if he should retreat. He was no coward, but he wasn't stupid either. Deciding to leave the way he came, he backed away. "I'll, uh, give you some space."

"Sure, Joey, do whatever you want," she said bitterly. "Like the rest of your kind."

Joey made his way downstairs and to the kitchen. He realized there was nothing he could do or say right now that would be correct. This was a 'men suck and they're all alike' type mood if he'd ever seen one, which he had, plenty of times, thanks to his sister, Bree.

He rummaged through the fridge, settled for a beer and sat down at the kitchen table. He'd only taken a few swallows when he heard Breez stomping down the stairs. She entered the kitchen, a woman on a mission. He thought maybe she'd come to fight with him, but apparently she had someone else in mind. She grabbed her keys off the counter and walked past him to the garage door.

"Where are you going?" he ventured to ask.

"I'm going over there," she hissed.

He moved so quickly she ran right into his hard body.

"Get out of my way. I can see my sister if I want to."

"You're not going over there."

"You can't stop me. I'm gonna see my sister tonight."

"You won't be helping her."

"She needs to know that I won't give up. That we'll get her out."

"She knows you won't give up on her. She knows you love her."

"Get out of my way, Joey."

"Sorry."

Her eyes glared up at him. "I'm not freaking kidding around. Get the hell out of my way."

"No, I'm not letting you go over there."

She shoved him as hard as she could. “Move!” she screamed.

He shook his head.

She tried to muscle her way past him but he wouldn’t budge.

“Fine,” she said as she turned and stomped out of the kitchen. She headed straight to the front door, pulled it open and stepped out.

Joey grabbed her arm and pulled her back inside.

“Let me go,” she yelled.

“You’re not going over there,” he said calmly.

She tried to jerk her arm away but he wouldn’t let go. Before she knew what she was doing, she pulled back her other arm and slapped him as hard as she could.

The cracking sound seemed deafening. Breez gazed at him in horror as she realized what she’d done. Joey never flinched. He didn’t even appear angry.

“I’m, I’m sorry,” she said, covering her mouth with her hand. “I’m so sorry, but I need to make sure my sister’s okay.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I understand what you’re feeling. Still, I can’t let you go over there.”

“You think just because you’re bigger and stronger you can tell me what to do?”

“It might seem to you that that’s the case, but the real reason would be because I care about you and your sister– and your nephew, I might add. Let’s think about him for just a second. What kind of scene would he be witness to if you go over there tonight, with Gordon home?”

The tears welled again. “But, but she has to know that I haven’t deserted her.”

“She knows.”

Breez looked up at him, gazing deeply into his deep brown eyes. “Tell me the truth, Joey, are we really gonna be able to get her and Logan out of that house?”

“Yes. I give you my word that we will. You heard the plan of action. We’re gonna find out what Gordon has on the judge and have the custody order revoked. It won’t take longer than a week, maybe two, but we will get her out.”

The tears were flowing freely now. “I need her to be free,” she cried. “I can’t seem to function knowing my sister is being held prisoner.”

Joey nodded. "I get that. Really." He pulled her inside the door, closed it, locked it, then turned to her and brushed her tears from her face using his thumbs. "Breez, your sister is much stronger than you give her credit for. All is not lost."

"Oh, Joey, I wish you could've heard her this morning. She was talking about how great everything is gonna be. How she and I are gonna see each other every day, and play tennis together and have family cookouts with your family."

"My family?"

She sniffed, wiped her tears, nodded. "She's in love with your brother and she was allowing herself to dream about being with him, living with him and how great it was gonna be. I hadn't heard her talk like that, you know with stars in her eyes, since the night before she left for college. I admit, it worried me. She wears her heart on her sleeve. I know she's older, but she's so naive."

"Better not to hope and dream of a better day?" he asked.

"Maybe. Just may– be," she said indignantly.

"Look, I'm not really known for being softhearted, and yet I think it's good for people to dream, to plan for having what they want."

Breez blew out a breath, feeling the fatigue seep into her bones. "Maybe, Joey. Maybe. But you won't catch me doing that."

Joey frowned.

"What?"

"I hope to make you do that. Because I want you, and I want you to want me."

"I think I've shown you just how much I want you," she said.

"I'm not talking about sex."

She moved closer. "Well, I am."

Joey sighed, realizing he wasn't gonna get any other declarations any time soon. Somehow, some way, he was gonna get past that hard exterior she'd built around herself and make her understand that she had no need to fear him.

"Are you sure you won't come with me to bed? Some mindless pleasure, you'd definitely be good for that," she said.

The words hurt, but he did his best to push them from his mind.

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Mark stared out at the ocean as the sun crept up behind him. The morning light sparkled on the water and the beautiful, breathtaking

sight helped to lift his spirits. He breathed in the cool, salty air and tried to fill his heart with light and positive thoughts.

He'd gotten out of bed at five after trying to sleep all night without much success. He'd left JoJo sleeping and run the few miles to the beach. After some interval training, he'd knelt down in the sand and prayed. That welcome feeling of peace came over him, settled in his heart. He sat and meditated with the intention of clearing his head and getting his thoughts in order. His goal was obvious—to get Judge Latham's order of custody thrown out. The means to do that were also obvious– investigate Judge Latham. Ameritech was already on it.

Drawing a giant cleansing breath, Mark glanced at his watch. It was time to get home and get JoJo up for school. He rose, pointed heavenward, whispered a "thank you," and headed home.

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Breez slowly ran her fingertips over Joey's chest. She glanced up at him. She'd come searching for him in the wee dawn hours of morning, feeling bad about the things she'd said to him the night before. He was on the sofa, his laptop open. She'd curled up next to him, intent on distraction, but he wasn't having it.

He leaned back against the gray sofa, staring at his laptop. He was a beautiful man. He blinked, which brought her attention to his long eyelashes and his solemn brown eyes. Her eyes lowered to his clever mouth and to the small dimple in his cheek.

Reaching up she stroked the dimple, taking note of the scratchy growth of beard. If one were to look up the word masculine in the dictionary it would have a picture of Joey Adams right there, she thought. She touched her finger to his lips. "What are you thinking about?" she asked.

He grabbed her hand, pulled it away from his mouth. "Thinking I need to get moving. I have a lot of prep work to do in order to nail Gordon and the judge."

"Oh."

He smiled at the sound of disappointment in her voice.

"So, I was in such a bad mood by the time we got home last night, I never did get to ask you about your sister. What was that all about?"

"Jeffy is—special," he finally said. "She's a genius. Certifiable. Her IQ is like 192 to 200, which is considered 'high genius.' Along with that, she has psychic abilities. She's able to see the future

sometimes, but it's not always clear to her, still, we've learned to trust her gut instincts."

"But what was the deal with what she did with Mark?"

"Well, she's also an empath. Let me just say this. It's not some kind of sorcery, speaking to the dead, or psychic thing like most people think of psychics. Jeffy's gift is given from God. Her relationship with Jesus is strong and close and the knowledge given to her is God-given."

"Okay, sort of like a seer in the Bible. And you said she's an empath. That means she can feel what others feel?" Breez asked.

"Exactly. She, like, tunes in to their emotions. The first time she did, it was an accident. Then she found if she tries, she can get a clear picture. Then she found that she can actually alter the way someone is feeling. You know, like take away their pain. She's a healer. It is her calling."

"That is amazing."

"Yeah, sort of, but the problem is, she's not good at it yet. When she does this, when she takes away people's pain, physical or emotional, she ends up taking the pain into herself. It can take some time for her to transmute it so she can function and she does that through prayer and fasting and staying in the Word. It's very hard on her. Eric has done some research into this and there are places, with experienced empaths, who can help teach her, train her, so that she can help others without hurting herself."

"Is she gonna go to one of those places?"

"Maybe. But finding a place that doesn't dishonor Jesus is part of the problem. Still, she wants to learn, but she hasn't had time to do it, she's so in demand at the hospital."

"What kind of doctor is she?"

"She started out as an infectious disease doctor, moved into cardiology then neurology. She's thinking about microbiology. She wants to end disease. She wants to heal the world. She feels that is where God is pointing her. Right now though, she's so young emotionally, she's having a hard time making decisions. On top of that, she thought she was madly in love with her boyfriend of five years and he broke it off with her about six months ago. She hasn't gotten over it yet."

"Bless her heart. She's such a sweet girl. I mean, you can just feel her sweet spirit whenever she's around. It must be hard for her to be so brilliant and yet be so confused about what direction to take in life."

"It *is* hard on her. I think she's thinking about going on hiatus to the monastery. That will help."

"The monastery?"

"Yes, Eric is in good with some Buddhist monks right here in California, and also with some Shaolin monks in northern China. We've been blessed to be allowed to visit with them for short periods of time. Jeffy is thinking of an extended stay, but she will have to work hard to get permission to stay longer than a few weeks. I have a feeling though, when they see what she can do, they'll ask her to stay."

"Those places, they don't mind that Jeffy is Christian?"

"Because of Eric's reputation, they honor and respect our faith."

"Does Jeffy do all the martial arts stuff like the rest of your family?"

"Oh yeah, Jeffy can definitely kick some butt. She's quick, she's strong and her mind thinks faster than a computer."

"Hm, maybe she should be the one fighting in the Kino challenge."

Joey smiled. "Actually, Breez, maybe you're right. I should ask her if she's ever considered it."

"When is the challenge?"

"It's usually the second Saturday in November."

Breez shrugged. "Maybe focusing on something else entirely will give her brain a rest."

"I think that sounds like a great idea."

Breez snuggled her head against Joey's chest and breathed a sigh. "Your family is definitely outstanding it seems in everything they do. Tell me though, what's with the names?"

"The names?"

"Yeah, everyone has the same name."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, like, Joey and JoJo, Eric and Eric, Jeffy and Jeff."

"Jeff isn't related."

"Still, you know what I mean. Even though I think it's sweet that Mark named his son after you..."

"He didn't name his son."

"He didn't?"

"It's a long story, but I'll try to tell it briefly. On Mark's eighteenth birthday, he had a one-night stand with a girl who was staying at our house. She came to his room, like, a birthday gift, you know?"

Breez giggled. "I get it. Nice gift."

"Yeah, Mark thought so too at the time, though there were consequences. Anyway, as it turned out, she was sick, with brain cancer. She finally went back to live with her parents and nine months later we found out she'd died. It was then we also found out she'd given birth to a child, Mark's child. She named the baby after her father whose name was Joseph. So suddenly, we had two Josephs in the immediate family. Let me just say that the one thing Mark doesn't regret is creating his son. He loves JoJo with everything he's got. He was meant to be."

"Well, that's some story."

"There's a lot more to it, but I don't have time to tell it right now, but back to the name thing. There are two Erics because Ricky named his son after his father to show him honor. Really though, there are actually three Erics, because Ricky is also an Eric. We call Jeffy 'Jeffy,' because of her initials, JF, which stands for June Flower. But no one ever calls her June Flower except for her teachers and people who don't know her. Mostly she's Jeffy or Dr. Kino."

"And I guess it's sort of fitting then that your girlfriend and your sister have very similar names. Breez and Bree, except I know Bree is actually Breanna."

"Yeah, but no one in our family calls her that. She's been Bree as long as I can remember."

"How much older is she than you?"

"Eleven years, but don't tell her I told you so."

"Wow, that's hard to believe. Geez, she looks like she's my age. Does she do all the martial arts stuff too?"

"No. She's the only one in the entire family who has no interest in training." He shrugged. "I guess when you have Ricky as a protector you don't need anything else."

"So, can Ricky best you in a fight?"

"Yes, and I can best him."

"You're equal then?"

"We're different and have different things going for us. Ricky is fifteen years my senior. He was my teacher, is my teacher. He's known

for his speed, his quickness. He's like lightning. He's instilled that in me along with a number of other great qualities. His goal as my instructor would be to have me be able to beat him one day. The thing is, I doubt that I would ever try hard enough to do that."

"You have a great deal of respect for him."

"A great deal and for my stepfather who also was my teacher."

"I thought Mr. Lee trained you."

"I went through his highly acclaimed security training, yes, but I didn't start training with Jason until I was eighteen. Besides, Jason was trained by Eric and Eric consulted with him to put together the Ameritech training module."

"What's the training like at Ameritech? Is it hard?"

Joey laughed. "It's hell. The Elite training, it's comparable to SEAL training, also F.B.I. training in some ways though there's a much more positive spin on things."

Breez nodded. "That's impressive. And you did so well that you're now Jason's top man?"

"I'm not the only one, but yes, I'm one of the top as far as the training goes. I'm his top man mostly because we're like family."

"Impressive, Joey. Is there anything you can't do?"

He glanced down at her, unsure if he'd actually heard the sarcasm. Her eyes met his, assuring him that he had. He sighed. "Apparently," he answered shortly. "Anyway, I'd better get moving." He took her face in his hands and kissed her soundly, moved her aside and stood up. "Mind if I use your shower?"

"Of course not," she said softly, realizing she'd hurt his feelings.

Breez watched him head upstairs. She shook her head. Why did she have to say mean things to him? What was her problem? She really liked him. She really cared for him. Really, she knew what the problem was. Just as her sister had pointed out—he scared her. Oh well, time to push that problem aside. This morning, she was going over to see her sister.

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Bella thought she'd heard someone knocking on the front door. Gordon had left for the office over an hour ago. Logan had left for school a short time later, after he'd come into her room to say goodbye and assure himself that she was fine.

Pulling on her robe, she headed down the stairs. When she got to

the front door she used the peephole, but no one was there. Thinking maybe she'd received a delivery, she opened the door. She stopped abruptly, stepped back. "Mark!"

She immediately tried to close the door on him but his hand darted out to stop her.

"No, Mark, you can't be here," she uttered softly as he pushed his way inside and closed the door behind him.

Tears immediately sprang to her eyes, streamed down her face. "I told you not to come."

He took her gently by the shoulders. "I had to come, Bella. I had to make sure with my own two eyes that you're okay. I had to hear it from your lips."

She shook her head as the tears fell. "Go away, Mark. I'm fine, now go away."

"Bella, listen to me. I'm working on getting the order of custody reversed. It may take a week or two but I will get it done."

"No," she said, still shaking her head. "No more hopes. It hurts too much. I can't bear it."

"Bella, please, baby. I love you. I will get you out."

"No, Mark. Don't tell me that."

"Bella," he said as he pulled her against his chest.

She didn't fight it. How could she fight what she craved? She buried her face against his crisp white shirt and cried. She felt his large hand stroking her hair, rubbing her back.

"I know it's hard, but I don't want you to give up. Please don't give up. I don't blame you for not trusting me anymore. Gordon outmaneuvered me, but I promise you, I won't let it happen again. I'm a fast learner, Bella. Please, try to trust me a little longer. I love you and I *will* get you out of this situation."

Her tears ended and she looked up into his eyes.

He looked her over and gave her a reassuring smile. "The swelling is already going down."

She nodded nonchalantly as if she couldn't care less. "Mark, go away now, and don't come back. I don't want to see you anymore. Logan and me, we'll be okay. Just forget about us."

"That's not gonna happen. I know where you're coming from. I know it's hard to have your hopes dashed to bits, but there is still hope. It's just taking a little longer. That's all."

"Still, you can't come back. He suspects us. I don't know what he'll do if he comes home and finds you here."

"He's nowhere close."

"How do you know? He could drive up at any moment."

"Joey still has his car bugged. Right now Gordon is having breakfast at the Golden Hotel on Boulevard with his girlfriend."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

He took her face in his hands, kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her swollen mouth. "Don't give up. Promise me."

She tried to shake her head but he wouldn't let her.

"In a few weeks, you'll have custody of Logan, you'll be filing for divorce and then when you're ready, you and Logan will be moving in with me and JoJo. We'll be a family, Bella. A real family. And I'll treat you like a queen."

The tears started again. "Don't," she whispered.

"Promise me you won't give up on me."

She looked deep into his earnest brown eyes. How she loved this man. She nodded her head. "I promise."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

"But you have to go and don't come back."

"Okay, I'll go."

"And don't come back. It's too hard, Mark. Too hard to see you and not be able to have you. Don't come back until I can walk away from here for good."

He closed his eyes briefly. Finally, he nodded. "Then I'll see you in a week."

"Now go."

He pulled her close, kissed her softly. "I love you, Bella Bear."

She gasped.

"What?"

"That's what my father used to call me."

He smiled. "That should tell you something." He opened the door, turned to her once more.

"Just go," she urged.

Reluctantly, he turned, headed down the steps to his car.

Bella watched him get in, start the engine and drive away. When his car was out of sight she closed the door, leaned against it, sank

down to the floor and cried.

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She'd made comfort food for breakfast. A big, steaming bowl of oatmeal with decadent amounts of butter and brown sugar. She ate curled up in the kitchen bay window, watching the birds and squirrels battle for position at the bird feeder that she and Logan had put together this past summer. Gordon had said it was a perfect waste of time.

The knock at the kitchen door startled her and the ceramic bowl slipped from her hands and landed on the hard marble floor with a loud crash. Bella jumped up, careful not to step on the broken ceramic and went to the door.

Breez stood there, her eyes full of concern. "Are you okay? I heard something break."

Bella nodded. "I dropped my oatmeal."

Breez came in, wrapped her arms around her sister and hugged her hard. "You sit down, I'll clean it up."

"No, that's okay, I'll..."

"You'll do what I say for a change. Now sit."

Bella eased down into a chair and resisted the urge to tell Breez the best way to get it all up. She wanted to tell her to make sure the floor wasn't sticky or Gordon would flip out, but decided to keep that to herself and check it again after Breez left.

Admittedly, her sister did a pretty thorough job of it.

"So," Breez said as she finished and took a seat next to Bella. "I know you think I came over to yell at you, to tell you what an idiot I think you are for coming back here."

"And you're not going to?" Bella asked sarcastically.

Breez grinned. "No. That would be a waste of time. I came to tell you that Mark and Joey and the whole Kino clan are working very hard to turn this around for you and tell you to keep your chin up because you are not alone. Not by a long shot."

Bella blinked as she took in her sister's words. "The whole clan?"

"Every single one of them. And more. Mark's boss, Justin; Joey's boss, Jason; and Jason's wife, Angel. Another Ameritech agent who's close to the family, Jeff, and even his wife, who, by the way, is coming to visit you."

Bella's head was spinning. "Who's coming to see me?"

"Her name is Mickey and she's totally cool. I really like her. She's

Jeff's wife. Jeff is an Ameritech agent. Apparently his wife has been through some sort of similar abusive situation and she wants to talk to you about it."

Bella sighed, shook her head. "I'm just so tired, Breez. So tired. I don't know that I have the energy to talk to anyone else."

"Oh, sweetie, I know. Look, just see her for a second and if you still don't want to talk, just tell her. But Bella, I have to say, you sound like you're giving up. Don't give up, sis. Don't ever give up. There's so much for you to gain once we get you over this hurdle."

"Yeah, that's what Mark said," she whispered.

"He's totally whacked out in love with you."

Bella's eyes moistened. "I love him too, Breez."

"I know. It's pretty easy to tell." Breez clapped her hands together. "I'm guessing that was your breakfast I just cleaned up, so, what can I make you?"

"Nothing, Breez. Really," she continued when Breez made a face. "I'm not hungry. I was just going through the motions. I'm just so tired. I feel totally drained."

Sighing, Breez rose. "Okay, then, let's get you up to bed. Mom always said that we should listen to our bodies. When all you want to do is sleep, then you should sleep."

Thinking of her mother made her smile and Bella allowed Breez to escort her upstairs. When Breez started into the bedroom Bella had shared with Gordon, Bella told her about the new sleeping arrangements.

"Well, I don't know what that's all about, but I think it's great. Just don't trust him. Do you have a lock on the door?"

"Yes, but if he wanted to get in, the lock wouldn't keep him out."

Breez pulled the covers down on the bed. "True, but it would give you some time. Here, into bed with you."

Bella climbed in and Breez covered her up. "I'm gonna lock up the house when I leave. Is there anything else I can do for you? Do you need anything at the store?"

"No, Breez, I'm fine. I just want to sleep."

Breez leaned down, kissed her head. "Sleep then, sis. This time next week this will all be a distant memory."

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Bella smiled pleasantly and patiently at the pretty woman standing at her door. "Hello, you must be Mickey." She opened the door wider. "Please come in."

Mickey smiled and stepped inside. "Thank you. So, who told you I was coming?"

"Breez told me."

"I really like her."

"She really likes you too."

"I suppose then, that she told you why I wanted to see you."

"Yes, though I don't know what you can say to me that I don't already know."

Mickey nodded her head. "Nothing at all, I'm sure. It's just that speaking to someone who's been through a similar situation can be extremely helpful."

Bella sighed. "Okay, well, I was just having some lunch. Would you like something?"

Mickey smiled as she remembered her first chat with Eric Kino. She'd said almost the same thing. "No, but I'll sit with you while you eat. You need nourishment in order to heal," she answered, mimicking the same words Grandmaster Kino had said to Mickey several years ago.

She followed Bella through the house to the kitchen. Bella went to the window seat and scooped up her plate holding a sandwich with one bite taken. They sat down at the breakfast table.

"So, Mickey, that's a cute name," Bella said.

"It's for MacKenzie."

"A very pretty name."

"I suppose." Mickey looked Bella over. Her face was bruised. Her lip and cheek swollen. "He messed you up pretty bad, huh?"

Bella shrugged. "Not as bad as other times actually. Joey got in pretty fast and pulled him off me. Breez says you've been through the same thing."

"Not quite the same. I was beaten by my stepfather from the time I was seven to my eighteenth birthday. The whole story was actually all over the national news. At the time my name was MacKenzie Daley. Senator Daley was my stepfather."

Bella's mouth gaped open. "Oh, I remember that. That was you? Oh, bless your heart. Your mother ended up killing him, right?"

"Yes."

"And your husband, he's the one who rescued you, the one who found you, like out in the woods."

Mickey smiled fondly. "Right. Jeff. The love of my life."

"And your Jeff has been watching over me at night."

"He has been, yes, until the surveillance changed. Now he's watching over Judge Latham, who is the judge that signed the custody order for your husband."

"Oh. Well, everyone really is working on this for me, aren't they?"

"Yes they are, Bella, because everyone is very concerned for you. Especially Mark."

Bella nodded as her eyes teared up.

Mickey smiled. "That happens a lot I bet."

"What?" Bella asked as she sniffed.

"You get all weepy."

She dabbed underneath her eyes with the corner of her napkin. "I guess I'm just a wimp."

Mickey suddenly reached out and took Bella's hand. "Listen to me, Bella. You are nothing like a wimp. Look at what that man did to you, and as you say, this isn't even a very bad one. Yet, you came back here to face him and all that living with him entails so that your son doesn't have to face him alone. Do you think those are the actions of a wimp? Not hardly. Those are the actions of a strong and brave woman who would do anything to protect the ones she loves. You are a hero, Bella. You are amazing."

Dumbfounded, Bella stared at the woman with new eyes. She was beautiful. Glossy, dark brown hair that came just past her shoulders. Bright brown eyes. Smooth, creamy complexion. Slightly turned up nose. Sweet smile. Slim, almost fragile looking, but this woman was fierce. Strong. Bella remembered, she'd been kidnapped, and she ended up killing her abductors and getting away. Bella smiled at her now. "I remember thinking, back when I heard how you'd escaped from your kidnappers, I thought, huh, don't be messin' with that woman. I remember thinking you were incredibly strong and brave."

Mickey shrugged. "It was instinctive. It was survival. I was strong. I am strong. We women, we do what we have to do in order to survive. You're strong too, Bella. Just as strong as I ever was. So getting a little weepy is okay. It's the way we let off the pressure so it doesn't break

us. Crying is not weak. It's wise. It's a release. Just don't sink into despair. Keep that hope alive. This is a very temporary situation."

Bella nodded. "Apparently, it really is."

"And you can handle this because you're strong and because you have so many people who love you and are working on your behalf."

Bella smiled at her. "I am strong. I don't know where it came from, but suddenly I do feel strong. I used to be afraid of Gordon. And, I admit, I don't like to be hurt. I don't do pain well," she added with a smile. "But, I'm not afraid of him anymore. I don't cower anymore. Not since, well, not since Mark told me he loved me."

Mickey nodded. "Yes, because love makes us strong," Mickey agreed. "With love, anything is possible."

"I'm glad you came to see me, Mickey. Thank you."

"Thank you for letting me in. I'm just paying it forward."

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"Where are you?" Joey asked.

"I'm at the courthouse. I have some paperwork to file and a brief meeting and then I'm headed back to the office," Mark answered.

"Are you gonna eat lunch today?"

Mark glanced at his watch. "No time."

"Okay, well, I'm in the area and have some information for you. I'll meet you in the courthouse lobby. I don't want to come all the way in and have to check my weapon."

"Got it. I'll look for you."

"End call," Joey said as he took a corner. Fifteen minutes later he was eyeing his brother as he made his way down the giant staircase that led to the courthouse lobby.

"You look like crap," Joey said as Mark joined him.

They clasped hands. "Thanks, Joey. I can always depend on the truth from you. You said you have information. Whaddya got?"

"It took us some time to come up with Latham's address. When we did, we found it odd."

"In what way?"

"He lives in a small house near Lynwood."

Mark frowned. "That's not exactly the area of town you'd expect to find a judge making his kind of money."

"Exactly. This morning, when Latham was leaving, Jeff saw a woman leave at the same time. A young woman."

"So you think he's having an affair and Gordon's threatened to tell his wife?" Mark asked.

"No, because his wife divorced him two years ago."

"Okay, so then, she got the house and money and he's left with just enough for a small house in Lynwood?"

Joey shook his head. "There's more to it than that if you ask me. I got a feeling about this. I need to find out who this woman is and what the story is behind the divorce."

"What will it take?" Mark asked.

"Just a little time is all. Jason has the equipment needed without having to plant surveillance cameras."

"Oh good, he's gonna pull out the big guns for us."

Joey nodded. "What would you expect? We're family. He'll do anything he can to make this right. He wants Bella safe and Angel is beside herself over this."

Mark nodded, ran a hand through his hair.

Joey slapped him on the back. "Come on, I'll walk you out to your car. Then I have some investigative work to get to."

They walked together out the courthouse doors and started down the wide concrete steps that led to the street. The sun shone bright, the sky appeared a crisp blue. Neither gave a hint as to the trouble brewing.

The area was crowded, people coming and going, hurrying to grab lunch or to make a court appearance. That was the only reason Joey didn't immediately recognize the large man standing at the bottom of the courthouse steps.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion. A woman yelled, "He's got a gun!" Joey's eyes quickly scanned the crowd. By the time he registered who held the gun, it was already pointed toward him and Mark. Thinking of his brother first, he shoved him.

A split second later there was a popping sound. And another. People were screaming and running. A uniformed police officer and a plainclothes detective tackled the big man.

Mark quickly recovered from being shoved down the steps and looked back to where Joey had been standing. Only he wasn't standing. He was on his back, a splash of red blossoming in the middle of his chest. Mark made it to him, dropped to his side and immediately pressed his hand against the hole in his chest.

"Dear Jesus, help him, please. Aww, Joey," he muttered. "You're

gonna be okay, do you hear me?" he cried.

Joey looked up into Mark's eyes. "Can't–breathe," he managed to get out.

Mark wanted to panic. He wanted to cry out, 'please, God, don't let Joey die,' but he kept all that to himself. "I think your lung is collapsed. That's all. That's no big deal. They can fix that."

Joey nodded slightly before his eyes started to close.

"No, Joey," Mark yelled. "You look at me. You keep your eyes open and you look at me, please," he begged, his voice filled with emotion.

Joey nodded again, blinked, trying hard to obey his older brother. "Hurts like hell," he muttered.

"So what," Mark argued. "You've been in pain before. Stay with me, Joey. You stay with me." Mark took a moment to look down at his hands which were now covered in Joey's blood. Then he saw a little lower, another hole, more blood, just to the left of Joey's navel. "Please, God," he whispered. He couldn't control the moisture that gathered in his eyes. He looked back at Joey's face. His eyes were closed.

"Joey, you open your eyes and stay with me."

Joey responded but his breathing was short and raspy. He coughed and blood sputtered from his mouth.

"Don't leave me, brother," he whispered. "Don't leave me. You fight. Think of Mom and Bree. Think of JoJo and Eric and Taylor. Think of Breez. You fight to live, Joey."

"Take care...Breez..."

Mark waited. When Joey didn't go on he leaned closer. "Take care of her yourself, Joe."

There was no answer. At that moment Mark was pulled away by paramedics. The rest was a blur. It seemed only a matter of seconds that a paramedic was talking to him, wanting to examine him. Mark looked around. Joey was already gone. Cops were everywhere. The guy that shot Joey had been removed from the scene.

"Sir, you're in shock. Come on now, and let us get you checked out," a woman was saying.

He slowly turned to look down at the medic insignia on her shirt, then up at her face.

"What hospital did they take my brother to?"

"They took him to the Critical Care Trauma Center at USC."

"That's where I'm going."

"You're in no condition to drive."

"Then take me there."

She nodded. "I will if you allow us to monitor you on the way."

"Whatever it takes."

It took Mark a second or two to realize his cell phone was ringing. Trying to clear his head, he looked at the caller ID and hit talk. "Eric," he said, "it's Joey." His voice broke and he had to work hard for control.

"Jeffy knew. That's why I called. Take a deep breath, Mark. How bad is it?"

"It's bad. Some guy shot him. Right in the chest. I don't even know if he's still alive."

"He's alive."

Mark nodded, blinked the moisture back from his eyes. "They took him to the trauma center at USC. I'm on my way there now."

"Okay, look, Mark, I know you're hurting. Hold it together for a little longer. We're on our way. Don't worry about JoJo, we'll go get him after practice. We'll see you shortly."

"Breez," Mark mumbled. "I promised Joey..."

"I'll call her. Mark, I'm not sure if you should be driving."

"I'm not, I'm going in an ambulance."

"Okay, good. One less worry. Stay strong."

Mark hung up and stared at the phone.

"Come on, now," the paramedic said gently.

Mark nodded and climbed into the back of the ambulance.

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Romans 5:3-5

"Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Chapter Thirteen

"Well," Mickey said as she rose. "It's been a pleasure meeting you and talking to you. I hope you don't mind if I come back again."

Bella smiled. "No, I don't mind. As long as, well, I mean, it's always better to visit when Gordon's at work."

"I understand." Mickey frowned as her cell phone vibrated for the third time in a row. She smiled at Bella. "Excuse me. I turned it on vibrate so we wouldn't be interrupted but I'd better see why Jeff's so anxious to talk to me." She pushed a button, placed the phone to her ear. "Yes, Jeff, are the boys going crazy?"

Bella watched as Mickey's expression changed from pleasant to horrified. "No, oh, no, Jeff. Is he alive? Yes. Yes. Okay. I'm with Bella. No, I'll leave right now. I'm on my way." She hung up, looked at Bella with tears streaming down her face. "Joey Adams has been shot."

Bella gasped, her hand flew to cover her mouth. "Oh, no." Her eyes welled with tears. "When? Where? Is he alive?"

"About a half hour ago, just outside the courthouse. They don't know if he's alive. He was with his brother."

"Mark? Is he..."

"Mark's okay except for the fact he was standing next to Joey when some guy blew him away. So, I really have to go now."

"I'm coming too."

"But..."

"I don't care what Gordon thinks, I'm coming. I'll drive myself. I need to pick Logan up from school."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I have to be there for Mark, for their family."

Mickey nodded, hugged her. "I'll see you there."

Bella ran upstairs and quickly dressed. Grabbing her keys and purse, she ran out the door and jumped in the car, calling Breez as she backed down the driveway. But she didn't answer.

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Ava Banks, the paramedic who'd been so kind to Mark, came back to the curtained-off room where she'd left him, bearing the information he needed.

"He's alive. He's stable but critical. They took him straight into surgery. Apparently, your sister is a doctor on staff here and was making a big deal about being in on the consultation."

"Is she here?"

"Just arrived."

"Mr. Adams?"

Mark looked up at a nurse who'd come to the door, the same one who'd been monitoring him for the past thirty minutes. "We're gonna go ahead and let you go. Some members of your family have arrived and are being taken to a private waiting area. If you'll follow me, I'll show you the way."

Mark hopped down off the table. "Thank you." He stopped, turned to Ava. "Thank you for everything."

She shrugged. "No thanks necessary. It's my job." She offered her hand. "I know you guys are all strong in the faith. I'll keep you and your brother in my prayers. And I'll call my pastor and start a prayer chain."

"Thank you," Mark said softly and turned to follow the nurse.

They walked briskly through the corridors, waited forever on an elevator, wound through another long corridor, were buzzed through a set of double doors, turned right and opened a door on the left.

The moment he stepped through and everyone turned to see him would remain forever etched in his memory.

His mother's tear-streaked face, Eric with his arm around her, offering her what comfort he could. Ricky stood behind Bree, his hands on her shoulders. Bree had her arms around Breez who had turned and was staring at him with horror on her face. Jeff was also there, and Justin and Lori Lee. Young Eric and Taylor stared at him.

JoJo immediately ran forward, buried his face against his father's chest. "Dad, is Uncle Joey okay?"

Mark cleared his throat. "I, uh, don't know much yet. He's alive and he's in surgery and Jeffy is here and she's consulting."

"Yeah, we know that part, Dad. She threw a big fit to be able to be in on it," JoJo replied.

Mark's eyes met his mother's. "Mom," he said, his voice breaking. "I'm sorry."

She came forward and wrapped her arms around her son. "Oh, Mark, I'm so glad you're okay."

Bree stepped forward and wrapped her arms around them both and the three of them cried together. They broke apart when the door opened and Jason and Angel came in followed by Mickey.

Each person hugged the other but the group fell silent when Jason began to tell what he'd learned. "Okay, the only information I have is Joey was struck twice with a 9mm Smith & Wesson, once in..."

"Twice!" Shelley cried.

Eric grabbed her and held her tight.

Jason went on. "Once in the chest just to the left of his heart and once in the abdomen, just to the left of his navel. He's in stable but critical condition. The guy who shot him was Dale Higgins. He's the guy Joey ran into Saturday, who'd beat his wife and tried to run her down. Joey intervened. This was straight up revenge."

Mark looked down, because he was thinking how much he'd like to give in to revenge right now.

"Higgins is presently being held in LAPD detention." Jason glanced at Mark. "And on another subject, your father has been notified and is on the way from San Francisco. I sent a chopper to pick him up. He should be here in a few hours."

Mark nodded. "Thank you, Uncle Jason. We appreciate your thoughtfulness. I didn't even think about calling Dad. My mind is gone."

Eric stepped up to Mark's side and leaned close. "Son, there's a bathroom through that door over there. I think it might be best if you go in and wash up. I'll give you my shirt. I have a t-shirt on underneath."

Mark looked at him, confused at his words, and then he looked down. He was covered in blood. Joey's blood. He held his hands out. They too were covered in dried blood. He glanced around at the room at large and realized that's why everyone stared at him with such a look of horror on their faces. Nodding his head, he accepted Eric's shirt and headed for the bathroom.

Breez's mind felt numb. She found a chair in the corner and sat with her knees drawn up and her feet on the seat. Joey– her Joey, was

somewhere in this hospital fighting for his life. Her cocky Joey whom she'd never thought anything could happen to. Joey was invincible, wasn't he? This was all just a horrible mistake. The guy that shot him did it because Joey had stepped in to keep the man from hurting his wife. This was all because Joey wanted to be a force for good in the world. He said he was a warrior here to protect the innocent, and this is his reward.

She glanced around at all the tear-streaked faces. She'd thought of the Kino family like she thought of Joey– invincible– but they weren't, were they? They were real people with real bodies that bled red just like everyone else. They were incredible though, in that they didn't only talk the talk. They walked the walk every single day. Already in this very room, they'd held hands, prayed, and then made a pact to think nothing but positive thoughts. They said 'God's will be done.' They loved and supported one another. There was power and strength and goodness and Breez realized that Joey was a part of all this. He was an integral part.

It was obvious he was loved a great deal by the people in this room and that included her. Her eyes opened wide, her heart expanded. She loved him. She truly loved him. Not because he was perfect, even though he was, but because his heart was strong and filled with love and compassion. Because he backed up what he said. Because he was a man of honor. Joey would never change. He would never become the monster Breez thought all men eventually became. She only had to glance around her at the men in Joey's family to realize, this was a way of life for them. Love and honor.

She should have realized it. As strong as their chemistry was, he'd been in control, he'd proven he loved her by not taking her to bed. He showed her he was a man of honor. Oh, what she wouldn't give to feel his warm, healthy body against hers right this very minute. Oh, how she loved him. The tears welled up again and ran freely down her cheeks. It was Joey's mom sitting down next to her that had her looking up.

Shelley put her arm around Breez and gave a soft squeeze. "He's gonna be okay. I just know it."

"You do?"

"I do. So don't worry. He's coming back to you."

"I love him," she whispered to Shelley.

Shelley smiled. "I know, and I'll tell you a little secret. I know he

loves you too."

Breez looked up at the beautiful woman, realizing it was taking quite an effort for her to put on that brave smile. "This must be torture for you too," Breez said.

"It's hard," Shelley admitted. "Maybe the hardest thing I've ever done. Bree was shot once, a long time ago, by a stray bullet, but they knew immediately that Bree was gonna be okay. This feels very much different from that. Someone actually tried to murder my son. I hate to think of my baby hurt and struggling to survive. But— he *will* survive. I don't think God is through with him, and if he's made it this far, he'll make it all the way. He's strong in both body and mind and if anyone can make it through this, it's Joey."

Breez wiped her tears. "He has to live," she said softly. "I have to tell him that I love him."

Shelley nodded and gave Breez a final hug. "Me too."

Eric kept careful watch over the people in the room, people he loved with every bit of his soul. At the moment, Mickey was busy comforting Bree. Angel was crossing the room to join Shelley and Breez. Jeff and Ricky spoke quietly in a corner. Mark stood in the opposite corner, his arms folded across his chest, his head down. Lori had Taylor on her lap and was speaking softly to her. Young Eric and JoJo sat with their heads together, whispering. Justin and Jason stood like sentries beside him, doing what he was doing, watching the occupants of the room to see if anyone needed help in any way.

However, all eyes turned when the door opened.

Mark looked up, his mouth dropped open. "Bella!"

"Logan!" Eric and JoJo exclaimed. Logan joined them immediately.

Bella came forward, threw her arms around Mark.

"Bella, what are you doing here?"

"I had to come. Oh, Mark, I'm so sorry. I had to be here for you, for your family, for Joey." She pulled away, put her hand against his cheek, looked into his eyes. When she saw that they were filled with tears, she immediately followed suit. "Oh, Mark," she cried.

They wrapped their arms around each other and stood together for a long time.

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They were right not to let her operate, Jeffy thought as she stood over her brother. They'd just wheeled him into recovery. She was trying to see him as a patient, but she couldn't. This was her brother. This was Joey, yet this person looked nothing like Joey. This person looked frail. He had tubes coming out of his nose, IVs and monitors and catheters attached to various parts of his body.

She'd wanted to see him with her own eyes before she went to report his condition to her family. She stroked his face, kissed his cheek and took his hand. Closing her eyes, she tried to communicate with him through her mind.

The moment she opened herself, she felt dizzy, but then she slowly became aware of him. She knew she was feeling what he was feeling. He was floating. He was trying to wake up and was frustrated that he couldn't make his body move. He was aware that he'd been shot and he was aware that he was still alive. *I'm here, Joey. Can you hear me? It's Jeffy. You're gonna be okay. I can see the places you're hurt. I can see the damage. I'm asking, no, I'm commanding that you be healed in Jesus' mighty and powerful name. Wow, did you feel that? I know you felt it because I'm feeling what you're feeling. That peaceful, warm light, it's beautiful. There's a part of God in every single one of us, Joey. It's like a light. Some people keep their light covered. Some people turn theirs off completely. But not you, Joey. Your light is bright. It's so bright and I want you to use your light to receive Jesus' healing. Receive it. You can do that, Joey. I'll help you.*

Jeffy closed her eyes and prayed over her brother until the nurse had to interrupt to check him. Giving his hand one last squeeze, she left him to go find her family.

When she opened the door to the waiting room she felt such warmth and love, it was like sinking into a soothing, hot bath. She smiled at everyone's hopeful expression.

"He's gonna be okay. His lung was damaged and repaired in two places where the bullet entered and exited, but it will heal. He lost a lot of blood and the goal today was to repair damage and stabilize him. There was a second wound to the abdomen. It exited the body. It nicked the small intestine, which was repaired."

"Is he awake?" Shelley asked.

"Not yet. He just made it to recovery. He'll be there another hour or so and then they'll move him to ICU. Once he's settled in there they

will let you see him, two at a time."

Eric extended his hand. Shelley took it and extended hers. Breez and Bella watched as without saying a word, the entire group clasped hands in a big circle. Mark extended his hand to Bella and Breez and brought them in to participate, into the circle. They all closed their eyes. Eric began speaking in what Breez thought sounded Hawaiian. When he finished, Shelley simply said, "Thank you, Jesus."

Ricky spoke then, in Chinese, as did young Eric. Jason and Justin spoke in Korean, Jeffy spoke in Latin, and everyone else spoke words of gratitude in English. Finally only Bella and Breez were left. Bella, like Shelley, uttered a simple thanks. Breez lifted her eyes heavenward and said in a firm voice, "I will be forever grateful for the second chance to love such a wonderful man."

"Hear, hear," Ricky said.

"Amen," some of the others murmured.

Breez looked at Bella. "Could there be a more loving, wonderful family than this?" she whispered.

Bella smiled. "I know Mom and Dad are happy that we've been brought into this family circle."

"Mark," Shelley said softly. "I know it's hard, but I need to know exactly what happened from your point of view."

They all took a seat and quieted to hear the story.

"There's not much to tell. It all happened so fast. We were walking down the courthouse steps, someone yelled something about a gun. Joey must have seen the guy because he pushed me away. I fell a few steps. I heard the gun fire twice. I looked back up at Joey and he was lying on his back on the steps. I put pressure on the wound and talked to him. He was conscious but sinking fast. I remember looking down and seeing the second wound and thinking we were gonna lose him. He was having trouble breathing and I kept telling him to fight for his life. He told me to take care of Breez. I told him to do it himself. That's all I really remember. There was a paramedic there. She said I was in shock and shouldn't drive and gave me a lift to the hospital in exchange for me letting her monitor my vitals."

"We were at home," Shelley said. "And Jeffy came running down the stairs screaming something about a gun and Joey. We called him immediately, but he didn't answer. Finally, Eric called you."

"Did Joey pull his weapon?" Jason asked.

"He never had a chance." Mark shook his head. "He pushed me away. His first instinct was to protect me."

"You'd do the same for him," Eric said.

They all turned when the door swung open and Robert Adams stepped into the room. "How's Joey? Where's my son? I want to see him now," he loudly proclaimed.

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She'd been afraid to see him, afraid he would look different somehow, but he merely appeared to be sleeping. Breez slowly crept closer, then reached over the bed rail and touched his shoulder, marveling at the strength she felt beneath her fingers. His eyes opened. She smiled at him. "Hey, Joey."

"Hi," he said, his voice barely audible.

"Are you in any pain?"

"A little. I hate this groggy feeling more than the pain."

"Try to relax." She stroked his cheek with her finger.

He closed his eyes. She watched him breathe a few moments, feeling gratitude for each breath she saw him take. "Joey, I want, I need to tell you something," she said.

He opened his eyes. "What have you done now?"

She smiled at his attempt at humor. "This is serious, Joey. I want to tell you...that I love you."

He frowned. "No, Breez."

"No?"

"No, you can't love me because I got shot."

Her eyes flashed with anger. "I don't love you because you got shot, you idiot. I realized I should've told you, that's all. And I can say I love you whenever I feel like it and I just felt like it."

He smiled and it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

"Breez, I know you love me. I've known for a long time."

"You cocky moron," she hissed.

"Confidence. Just confidence," he murmured.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

She let down the bed rail, leaned down and kissed him. "Get better fast, Joey, so I can show you just how much I love you."

"Now, that's incentive," he said as he drifted off to sleep.

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"I'm worried about you going back to that house," Mark said.

Bella smiled. "I've already talked to him. I told him why I picked up Logan from school and where I was going, because I didn't want him to think I'd kidnapped Logan and taken off."

"And what did he say?"

"He said some very ugly and unkind things about Joey that don't bear repeating."

"Aww, Bella, what are we gonna do, huh?" He took her in his arms, kissed her. "I'd better let you go while I have the strength to do it."

"You and everyone else keep telling me that you're gonna get me that order of custody. So, Mark, I believe you. I believe in you."

"Thank you, Bella." He kissed her again. "Now go."

He opened the car door for her, winked and smiled at Logan waiting patiently on the passenger side. "Take care of her."

Logan grinned. "I will."

Mark watched them drive away and headed back into the hospital. He hurried through the main lobby where paparazzi and TV news reporters tried to get him to talk. Justin had already delivered a statement. They didn't need anything else.

The family was making arrangements to stay with Joey in shifts. They were also insisting that Mark go home and spend the evening with his son. Mark's father, Robert, had also decided he would stay the night at Mark's house and had informed him that he was tired and ready to go.

Mark wanted to see Joey one more time before he left and walked quietly up to the bed.

Looking down at his sleeping brother, the movie of their lives played through his mind. Joey was the smaller one. The happy one. The cute one. Mark smiled. He was the one with the uncontrollable temper. Little Joey had gotten into dozens of fights in school and Mark had to talk him down several times.

He remembered the time the rope bridge had broken out in the Georgia mountains when they'd gone hiking. Joey had climbed right up that broken rope bridge like it was a ladder. Mark had fallen, broken his arm. His mother, too, had fallen. And almost lost her life. He shook his head to clear it of that image. Now, he had another image that would stay with him, one of him leaning over his brother, asking him to fight for his life, blood seeping out from under his hands as he

pressed on the wound.

"You gettin' all sappy on me, bro?" Joey muttered.

Mark blinked. Smiled. "Just came in to say good night."

Joey gave a slight nod. "I know all— " he stopped, gave a small grunt of pain. "I know all this was hard on you. Sorry about that."

"Apology accepted. Never let it happen again."

Mark held his hand out just above Joey's free hand. Joey swallowed hard, slowly lifted his hand and placed it in his brother's. Mark squeezed tightly. "Get some rest."

Joey grimaced. "I will."

Mark's brow furrowed. "Are you in pain?"

"It appears so."

"Okay, bro, I'll tell the nurse on my way out," he said as he quickly turned and left.

Outside the room, most everyone else had left the hospital. Jeff had surveillance duties. Mickey had to relieve Kimmie Lee, Jason and Angel's daughter, who'd been kind enough to stay with the boys rather than come to the hospital herself. It was her way to serve where she was really needed. Ricky and his family and Justin and Lori left about the same time as Bella and Logan. Jason was currently speaking to Eric and Shelley before he took his leave.

"Agent Dunlop will be here within the next thirty minutes and then I'll be heading out," Jason announced.

"Do you actually think Joey is in danger?" Shelley asked.

"Yes and no. Higgins acted alone. Still, I don't feel good leaving Joey vulnerable here. Not only is he a public figure but there are enemies out there, people who Joey has helped put away who know he's lying here in the hospital unable to defend himself. I won't leave him alone."

Eric nodded and shook Jason's hand. "Thank you, Jason. Have I ever told you that I think you do a fine job?"

Jason smiled. "Maybe once or twice, but you don't have to thank me. I'll be sending the bill to you."

"And I'll take care of that bill with pleasure." He put his arm around Shelley. "Well, let me get Shelley home so she can be back here bright and early in the morning."

Jason smiled at Shelley. "I have to say, I think it was very gracious of you to allow Breez to take the first shift with Joey."

Shelley shrugged. "I was young and in love once."

Eric frowned. "And what are you now?"

She smiled up at her handsome husband and shrugged. "Um, I guess I'm still young and in love."

"That's my girl."

Eric and Shelley went in to say goodnight to Joey. The nurse had just renewed his pain medication and so he was too groggy to talk. They kissed his forehead, hugged Breez and left.

Jason and Angel stepped in twenty minutes later. Joey struggled to speak to Jason about his feelings about Judge Latham, but Jason told him to relax. He would be back tomorrow to speak with him. Jason also let Joey know he wasn't alone, that Agent Dunlop was on duty.

Angel told him to hurry and get better because she needs her husband to take some time off. Joey smiled. She kissed his cheek.

"Well, I guess it's down to you and me," Breez said softly after everyone was gone. "Well, you and me and the agent outside the door."

Joey nodded. "Glad– you're– here."

Breez realized he was struggling to speak because of the fresh dose of medication. She reached through the bed rail and took his hand. "It's okay, Joey. You don't have to talk. Just rest and get better."

"You– rest– too."

She smiled. "I'll try."

~~**~~

"So, you just had to go flying off to the hospital to see your lover boy, huh, Bella."

"I already told you, Gordon, it's not like that. And yes, I had to go to the hospital. Joey could've died. He's like family. I had to be there for Breez, since he and Breez are gonna get married eventually."

Gordon's eyes glittered with rage. "You had to be there, huh? Well, I will never be family with that punk."

"I know that. I wasn't talking about you. I was talking about me, because, like it or not, Breez is *my* family."

Gordon was quiet a moment. Bella braced for the strike, but thankfully, it didn't come.

"You're getting mighty uppity, you know that?"

"Yesterday you said you liked the new brave me."

"I did say that, didn't I?" He moved closer. "Let me just say this. Don't push it. There's only so much I'll take from you." His eyes ran

over her face, down her body. He reached out to touch her cheek, smiling when she flinched slightly. "Your face already looks a lot better. The swelling is almost completely gone. You're almost pretty again."

She pulled away. "Don't get any ideas." She tried to walk away but he grabbed her arm and jerked her against him.

"I don't like you taking my son out of school."

"Oh, puleez, Gordon," Bella said sarcastically. "What do you think I'm gonna do? Take off with him and hide out somewhere for the rest of our lives? I wouldn't do that. You must know me well enough to know I wouldn't do that."

He nodded. "I know you don't have the guts to do something as bold as that. Just be careful, Bella. There's only so much I can take before you push me over the edge."

She jerked her arm away. "Don't threaten me. We have an arrangement. I live here with you only so I can be with my son. And you keep your hands off me."

"And what do I get out of this arrangement?" Gordon asked.

"Don't play dumb with me, Gordon. You think I don't know what you got? You got off the hook. You got your felony charges dropped so that you can keep your career."

His eyes opened wide. "Well then, dear wife, I guess you're not as dumb as I thought."

She headed up the steps. "Not nearly."

~~**~~

He'd left the house extra early, before even Logan was awake. He smiled. He had a pleasant errand to run and then he'd have breakfast with Katherine along with some hot early morning fun before he went in to the office. Ah, yes, life was good.

Thanks to some whacked-out guy bent on revenge, Joey Adams was lying in a hospital bed with holes in his chest. Gordon had been elated when he'd heard the news. He'd promised that he would pay him back one day, for what he'd done, for breaking into his house and interfering between him and Bella and mostly for manhandling him and cuffing him like some common criminal. Now was his chance for revenge.

He whistled a lively tune as he parked his car in the nearly empty hospital lot and walked across the parking lot at a brisk pace. He used

his credentials as an attorney to get the information as to what room Joey Adams was in. He had flashes of what he would do once he got to the room. So many things. Adams would show fear because he'd know Gordon was there for the revenge he'd promised.

Joey being in ICU would mean he would only be alone for short periods of time, but a few minutes is all Gordon needed. He turned the corner and saw the room at the end of the corridor.

A man sat in a chair outside the room and as Gordon approached, the man stood and blocked his way.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you can't go in there."

"I'm here to see Joey Adams. I'm his attorney."

"Sorry, sir, but I don't know you and I can't allow you in. May I see some identification?"

"No, you may not. Who do you think you are? Did you hear what I just said?" Gordon asked loudly.

"Yes, sir, you said you were Joey's attorney, which is a falsehood, so I have to think that your reason for being here is not to Joey's benefit. I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask you to leave."

"You can't keep me from going in there," Gordon said indignantly.

The man gave a slight smile. "I'm fairly certain that I can."

"You can't touch me. I'll take you to court."

"You try to get past me and I'll do more than touch you—sir."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Absolutely."

Gordon stood glaring at the man, looking him up and down. This guy was obviously another one of those Ameritech agents. They were all so cocky. Gordon knew he wasn't gonna get past him. His good mood deteriorated. He would have to wait for another time.

He stepped back. "Fine. I'll wait, but feel free to tell him I came by to see him."

"Oh sure, I'll be sure to do just that."

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"How's he doing?" Shelley whispered the next morning when she arrived at the hospital.

Breez smiled sleepily. "He's doing great. No problems. No complications. Jeffy came in about four times during the night to check on him and the doctor who did the surgery came and left about thirty minutes ago. He said he's doing so well they would probably move him

to a regular room by this evening. If not, then definitely by the morning."

"Oh, thank goodness."

"Hi, Mom," Joey said.

Shelley smiled down at him. "Hey baby boy. How do you feel?"

"I'm okay. Sleepy."

Shelley leaned over, brushed his hair off his forehead. "Then sleep, sweetheart. You need rest in order to heal."

Joey smiled. How many times had he heard those same words?

"Jason and Eric are outside. They want to come in and talk to you for a few minutes and then you'll be stuck with me today."

"Good. Breez needs to go home and eat and sleep."

"Yes she does," Shelley agreed.

The door opened and Jason, Eric, Agent Dunlop and another Ameritech agent entered the room.

"Quick group conference before they throw us out," Jason said. "Morning, Agent Adams. How are you feeling today?"

Joey smiled at Jason's formality. "Fine, sir. Ready for duty."

"Good. Your assignment is to heal quickly."

"Already on it, sir," Joey said.

"Agent Dunlop will be leaving and Agent Bradfield will be your buddy today."

Joey smiled and lifted his hand slightly. "Whazzup, Dan."

Agent Bradfield smiled at Joey. "Oh, not much, Joe. Nothing to talk about. Whazzup with you?"

"Oh, and one more thing," Dunlop suddenly said. "Some guy showed up at six-thirty this morning wanting to get in to see Joey."

"Did you get a name?" Jason asked.

"No. I don't think he wanted to give me a name. He said he was Joey's attorney which anyone at Ameritech would know isn't true."

"So, what did he look like?"

"Well dressed, expensive suit, slim build, light blond hair and blue eyes and an air of arrogance."

"Oh lord, that's Gordon," Breez said.

Jason nodded. "Sounds like him. Why would he try to see Joey?"

"Because he wants me dead," Joey forced out.

"Does he now?" Eric asked.

"Yep. His last words to me were, 'you're a dead man, Adams.' He

promised to get me for breaking into his house and rescuing Bella."

It took Joey every bit of energy he had to speak such a long sentence and he closed his eyes in exhaustion.

"What are you saying?" Shelley demanded. "What do you think he had planned?" she asked Eric.

Joey opened his eyes, gave a faint laugh. "Who knows? Maybe he was gonna put a pillow over my face."

"He came here to hurt you?" Shelley cried loudly.

"Now, Mom, calm down," Joey said weakly. "I was just kidding."

"That's not a bit funny."

"He didn't get in," Eric reminded her.

"Only because Jason had the forethought to place a guard." She let go of a string of curses. "How dare the man think he can come here and hurt my son."

Eric's lips twitched at his wife's use of bad language. It meant she was truly upset and he didn't dare remark on it.

"He probably just wanted to gloat," Joey offered weakly.

"He will not get away with this. I'm going to see him. I'm going over there right now." She turned to Eric. "I'm gonna need for you to make that happen. I'm gonna have a word with that man."

"Now, Shelley," Eric started.

"Don't you 'now Shelley' me. I rode with you today so you're gonna take me over there."

"No."

"Eric, I'm not kidding. I need you to make this possible. I'm gonna see him."

"No. No way, sweetheart. Sorry."

"Jason, will you take me over there?"

"Shelley, you are NOT going over to Gordon's office. Let us take care of it. I promise we will."

"I'm Joey's mother and I'm gonna take care of it. You don't think I could kick his butt?"

"I'm pretty sure you can," Jason admitted. "But you could get hurt doing it and I can't allow that. We will have a word with Gordon."

"A word, huh, he needs more than a word. I'm not afraid of that horrible man. He came to this hospital with who knows what in mind to do to my baby. He's not gonna get away with it."

"Shelley, calm down," Eric said. "You're getting Joey upset."

Joey quickly tried to hide his smile so that he could appear upset.

Breez reached over and squeezed Shelley's arm. Shelley glanced at her, saw the intent look in her eyes, immediately understood.

"Eric, please, take me to see Gordon Landow," she begged.

"No, Shelley. You need to let this go. Please, hon. Let this go."

Shelley looked down, defeat in her eyes. "Fine." She looked back up at Jason. "But promise me you'll have a word with that man."

"I promise," Jason said firmly.

"There's too many people in here," the nurse said as she came through the door.

"Oh, sorry," Shelley said. "We were just changing shifts." She motioned to Eric and Jason. "I know you guys had some business to discuss with Joey. Breez and I will walk down to the café."

Agent Dunlop told Joey to hurry and get well and left quickly. Agent Bradfield set up shop outside the room, and Shelley and Breez headed toward the elevator.

"So, you're gonna take me to Gordon's office?" Shelley asked.

Breez smiled. "Good, you figured out my message."

Shelley smiled. "Great minds think alike. I have a feeling you and I are gonna be great friends."

Breez laughed. "I hope so. When do you want to go?"

Shelley thought. "Probably wouldn't be wise to try to go right now, besides, I need to stay with Joey. Bree is coming up this afternoon about two. Will Gordon still be at his office at that time?"

"I think so. It's worth a try. I'll pick you up in front of the hospital shortly after two."

"I'll be ready," Shelley replied.

Back in ICU Joey did his best to fill Jason in on the suspicions he had about Judge Latham. He was finding it difficult to concentrate but finally got out what he wanted to say. Jason immediately called Jeff, relayed the information to him and had him run with it.

They were just getting ready to leave when Jeffy stopped in.

"Hi Daddy," she said cheerfully. "Hey Uncle Jason." She kissed them both on the cheek.

"Isn't it time for you to get home and get some sleep?" Eric asked.

"Yes, I'm on my way, but I wanted to check in on Joey one more time before I left." She went to his bed, took his vitals, did a quick exam, then took his hand and looked into his eyes for several seconds

before she spoke. "Hi Joey."

"Hey, sis," he said softly.

She touched his face and frowned. "You're tired. You're not getting enough rest."

"That's all I'm getting and you're not supposed to be using your super powers on me. You know how it drains you."

"Someone tried to end my brother's life. I'll do whatever I feel necessary to help him to heal. Now, you don't realize it, but just talking is taking all your energy. Tell me the truth. Do you feel tired?"

"Exhausted. I feel like I could sleep for days."

"Then that's exactly what you need to do. Let me just warn you, if you get overly tired, your body immediately begins to break down. Next thing you know, you've developed an infection. Then they won't move you out of ICU and even though they expect your hospital stay to be no more than ten days, it could end up a lot longer. Is that what you want?"

"Good grief, Jeffy, of course not."

"Then get some rest." She looked up at Jason and Eric. "The two of you know better than to get him all tired out. Where's Mom?"

"She went to the café with Breez."

"Fine. I'll stay with him until she gets back. You two go do whatever it is you macho men do all day."

Jason and Eric headed obediently toward the door. "She sure is getting to be a pushy little thing," Jason said.

Eric smiled. "Only when she's in her doctor mode."

"Bye, Daddy. Bye, Uncle, Jason," she offered sweetly.

"Bye, Jeffy. See ya later, Joey."

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Shelley spent the day holding Joey's hand, telling him funny stories from his childhood, telling him how much she loved him and simply watching him sleep. Every time she looked at his handsome face, his dimples, her heart overflowed with love. For a long time, he'd been her baby. She'd had her tubes tied after his birth and she had that special bond with him because she knew he would be her last. Then, the miracle of Jeffy came about, but Joey had never lost that baby of the family status in her mind.

Now, she'd almost lost him, but she knew better than to dwell on that. She gave thanks that he was alive and getting better every minute.

Still, it was hard to keep her mind from the fact that someone had actually tried to kill him. Why? Because he never backed down from doing the right thing. He is such a warrior. All of them are. Her entire family, each in their own way. And because Joey had defended a helpless woman, he came within an inch of dying.

Oh, and then there was Gordon Landow. Shelley tried not to hate the man, though she seemed to be losing that battle. She had no idea what he'd intended when he came to Joey's room earlier this morning, but she would find out very soon.

Just as she had that thought, Bree quietly opened the door and slipped in. "How's he doing?" she asked.

"He's sleeping comfortably right now. They were gonna move him out of ICU this evening sometime, but now they say it will probably be tomorrow morning."

"Why? Has there been a setback?"

"They said they're being overly cautious, but he's not as alert as they'd like him to be."

Bree frowned. "That sounds bad."

Shelley nodded. "That's what I said, but they assured me there was nothing to worry about. Still, I'll feel better when Jeffy comes in tonight and has a look at him."

Bree nodded. "Me too."

"Oh, and by the way, a few of the nurses were exclaiming over the fact that you were gonna be here and I told them you would have no problem giving them an autograph and taking a picture with them."

Bree nodded. "Sure, whatever it takes to make sure Joey is well taken care of."

Shelley smiled. "I also told them that Ricky would probably be joining you later."

"Ahh, so now we get to the heart of things," Bree joked. "He's bringing the kids up after dinner, so yes, he'll be here."

"Good. Then I'll leave it up to you to take care of business. Well, I have to be going. I have a few errands to run."

Shelley stood and leaned over the bed. "Bye sweetie. I'm leaving, but Bree is here."

Joey opened his eyes. "Bye, Mom. Love you."

"Love you too, baby."

Bree moved forward, took Shelley's place. "Hey squirt."

Joey smiled at his older sister before his eyes fluttered back closed.

Shelley grabbed her purse and hurried out of the room. Breez drove up to the curb the moment Shelley stepped out of the hospital front doors. She got in quickly.

Breez smiled at her. Shelley smiled back. She had a few choice words for Gordon Landow.

"I was thinking," Breez said as she drove. "Getting past two receptionists and an executive secretary to get into Gordon's office might be a bit difficult."

Shelley frowned.

"But, we might be able to get him to come out to us in the parking deck," Breez continued.

"Really? How?"

"All I have to do is tell him I have a message for him from Joey and to meet me in the parking lot in fifteen minutes."

"What makes you think he'll come?"

"I know Gordon. It's a challenge. He won't be able to resist."

Shelley nodded. "Okay then, make the call."

Breez dialed Gordon's cell. She didn't have to try to convince him to meet her. He told her he'd be on the top deck of the parking garage in twenty minutes. Breez hung up with a smile. "That was almost too easy."

Shelley frowned because those particular words meant more to her than what Breez knew.

"What's the matter?" Breez asked.

"It's the words you just spoke. 'Too easy.' It's a long story."

"We've got twenty minutes to kill," Breez said.

"Okay, well then, let's see, a long time ago, one of Eric's old enemies attacked me."

"You're kidding!"

"Unfortunately, no. He attacked me and beat me up pretty bad. He left a message for Eric, written on my stomach in black marker. It said, 'too easy.'"

"That's horrible."

"I'm over it, but when you said the words, it brought it back so fast. Weird how that happens sometimes."

Breez frowned. "So, you say he beat you up pretty bad. Then I guess you can really identify with what Bella has been through."

Shelley nodded. “In more ways than one. That same guy got to me so many times, it’s a miracle I’m alive.” She fingered the scars on the soft underside of her arm.

“I guess that explains why Eric is so protective of you now.”

Shelley nodded. “I guess, though sometimes he goes overboard. Like today. He knows I can take care of myself. I even asked him to go with me. I see no reason why he couldn’t have accommodated me.” She looked around as Breez pulled into a parking deck. “We’re here?”

“We are. So, do you know exactly what you’re gonna do?”

“I’m gonna ask him what he thought he was doing coming to see Joey in the hospital.”

“And you think he’s gonna give you the truth?”

“No, of course not. Still, I’m gonna let him know he won’t get away with doing anything to Joey. I just want to show him that neither Joey nor any one of his family members are intimidated by him and what’s more, that he really shouldn’t dare to mess with us if he wants to live another day.”

Breez giggled. “Mrs. Kino, you sound so fierce and tough when you talk like that.”

Shelley smiled. “Oh, I am fierce and tough, when I want to be. And today, I want to be.”

They drove up to the top deck which had only a few open parking spaces. Breez pulled into one and both women got out of the car and leaned against the back bumper, their eyes on the elevator from which Gordon should emerge.

It didn’t take long. Shelley’s body stilled in readiness for battle as the man walked off the elevator, straightening his cuffs and smoothing his hair.

Breez stepped out from the car so he would be sure to see her. He never slowed, but came straight to them.

Gordon glanced at his watch, his eyes moved over Shelley, dismissing her, and then to Breez. “Say what you have to say. I have things I need to do.”

Breez gestured toward Shelley. “Actually, she’s the one that has something to say to you.”

He turned impatiently. “And you are?”

“My name is Shelley Kino. I’m Joey Adams’ mother.”

Humor flickered in his eyes. “Joey sent his mommy to give me a

message? How very telling."

Shelley hadn't stopped to think about how wimpy it might look to have one's mother confront an enemy. Still, it wasn't as if Joey needed to prove himself to this man any more than he already had. She drew a deep breath. "Let me begin by telling you, Mr. Landow, that you don't impress me or intimidate me in any way so you can stop with the silly little barbs that you think are stabbing me in the heart."

He started to speak but she held up her hand to stop him. Breez looked on in admiration.

"I want you to tell me why you came to the hospital this morning and tried to get in to see my son."

"What makes you think I came to the hospital? You have your facts mixed up."

She rolled her eyes. "You must be more of an idiot than I thought."

"Listen you bi..."

"The agent we had on duty told us about your attempt and we ran the hospital security camera back. You were easily identified."

Breez smiled, realizing this woman was much tougher than she appeared and much smarter than she'd given her credit for.

Gordon's jaw clamped shut as he realized he'd acted rashly. He hadn't taken into consideration that the hospital had security cameras. His need for vengeance made him blind. He guessed it was a good thing he hadn't been able to get into the room, because he'd intended to hurt the man. Hurt him bad.

"What? No smart comeback this time? I didn't think so. Now I want to know what you intended."

Gordon smiled snidely. "Okay, so I was there, so what? I guess you'll never know what I intended, will you?"

She smiled back. "I already do. You intended to harm him. You intended to make him suffer because he was the one who stepped in when big, bad you were beating up on your tiny little wife. You're such a coward, do you know that? Only cowards beat up on women. Do you realize what kind of mentality that is? It's like kicking a little dog, or slapping a baby. Does it make you feel big and strong to know that you can beat up your wife? Maybe you do it because you know you could never go up against a man and win. You know why? Because you're a coward. A sniveling little coward. Oh, I know what you're thinking right now. You're thinking how good it would feel to plow your fist

into *my* face. And you know what? I really wish that you would try, because then I could justify kicking your ass. And I can, you know, easily."

He moved closer to her. She stood up straight, lifted her face proudly and waited for him to speak but it seemed he couldn't put two words together.

She shook her head. "You're pathetic," she said, noticing the word had a distinct effect on him. "Useless and pathetic," she added for good measure. "You just remember this; you mess with my family, anyone in my family, and it will be the last thing you do."

He finally found his voice. "You think you can come here and talk to me this way? You think you can come here and threaten me?"

She smiled. "I just did, didn't I? What are you gonna do, huh? Like I said, you don't intimidate me in any way." She turned away. "Come on, Breez, I just realized he's so pathetic he's not worth any more time."

He moved forward. "You just wait a minute. Now I have something I want to say." He reached out and grabbed her arm.

The voice seemed to come from nowhere. "Let go of her."

Gordon's head snapped around, looking for the source of the voice. Shelley and Breez did the same thing.

"Let go or die," Eric said softly as he stepped out from between two cars parked only a few spaces away.

Gordon opened his hand so fast, he practically shoved Shelley away.

"Shelley, get in the car," Eric ordered, pointing at his black Escalade parked a row over.

But Eric didn't intimidate Shelley any more than Gordon did. "I told you I could handle this myself. I didn't need your help," she ground out, her hands on her hips.

"And I asked you not to do this. We'll talk later."

"Fine, we'll talk later, but you just keep in mind that you just really pissed me off and that's not a good thing."

Eric glanced over at Jason who stood across the drive. The man was grinning. Eric rolled his eyes at him and then turned back to Shelley. "Fine, you're mad. Me too." He then turned to Breez. "And you, young lady, will have Joey to deal with so good luck with that."

Breez frowned.

Eric looked back at Gordon. "Just so you know, I believe Shelley's take on what you had planned this morning is right on—as was the threat she made. Let me give you a word of advice, counselor, you don't want to take us on. You will lose. You harm a member of my family and every single one of us will do what we have to do. Always. Without a doubt and without thought to the consequences." He motioned to Breez. "Get in your car and go now."

Breez did what he said without hesitation. Eric then took Shelley by the arm and gently guided her to the passenger side, opened her door and helped her in.

He nodded at Jason who was getting into his car. They all backed out and drove away, leaving Gordon standing there speechless.

Shelley folded her arms across her chest and stared straight ahead. Eric glanced over at her. He was truly angry. It reminded him of the first time he'd been truly angry at her, which was when she'd tried to intervene with some drugged-out kids on the beach in Daytona. He'd yelled at her and she'd yelled back at him and a short time later he'd been kissing her.

He fought the smile the memory brought to his lips. She'd put herself in danger then and she did it again today. And like back then, she was looking adorable as she sat nursing her temper. His Shelley was an extraordinary martial artist. She was a MART champion and she'd never stopped training. She could hold her own. However, she was a female, and like it or not, physiologically speaking, females were weaker than males. Strong, young, athletic females were weaker than males. Shelley *is* strong and athletic, but she is also about to turn fifty-six.

"Landow could've hurt you, Shelley."

She didn't answer.

"I know you would've gotten in some good licks and maybe taken him down, but not before he'd had a chance to hurt you."

She turned her head, glared at him. "I had it under control. I didn't need your help."

"He put his hand on you."

"So?"

"It's a first step."

"I understand that."

"I don't care how mad you are, Shelley, I'm not gonna let anything

happen to you. Period. It's my responsibility to protect you."

"It most certainly is not."

"Look, I'm not trying to pull any macho power play on you, Shelley. I really am not, but Shelley, there have been times when I was unable to protect you. Then there are times like this, when I am able to be there. It is my duty to do all I can to protect those I love. That includes the guys as much as the girls. Shelley, you have to understand that a man could hurt you or Bree or Jeffy when he may not be able to hurt me, or Ricky or Mark or Joey."

"Of course I understand that."

"Okay, then, all I'm asking is that you not put yourself in danger. You want to go confront the woman who stole your parking place, by all means, confront her, but not a man, and especially not a man with the history Gordon Landow has."

Shelley sighed. She knew he wasn't really being unreasonable. Still, she hated to lose the argument, even though it appeared that's how it would be this time. She looked over at him. "How did you know?"

He smiled. "Well, I know you would never give in that easy. Both Jason and I knew you had something up your sleeve. It was pretty easy to figure out."

"How did you know we'd be up on the top level?"

"It was the only level with any parking spaces so we figured you'd be coming up there. We actually thought we'd have to follow you into the building, but it turned out even better than we thought."

She frowned.

He smiled, placed his open hand on the console palm up. "I'm sorry too. I guess I should've conceded. I should've taken you to see him and stood there while you had your say. Your request wasn't unreasonable. I think I would've realized that and given in, called you and told you I'd take you myself, but when we realized you and Breez had a plan, we were curious enough to see how you handled things."

"And?"

He nodded. "And I'm proud of you, as always. My sweet Shelley is one tough lady."

She slipped her hand into his open one. "Then does that mean that you're not really mad?"

"Oh, yes I am. You put yourself in danger. When we get home I'm

gonna take you up to the bedroom and punish you," he said seriously.

Smiling, she brought his hand to her lips, kissed it. "I think I'm looking forward to that."

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"And then I hit the guy in the fade to win the game," JoJo said. He reached down, touched his uncle's hand. "And so, even though I didn't want to play with you being shot and everything, I'm glad Dad talked me into it. He said you wouldn't want me to miss my game and that playing was the best thing I could do for you."

"Well, he was right," Joey said weakly. He smiled at the three people who stood by his bed. His brother, Mark, his nephew JoJo and his father, Robert. "And I'm sure your grandfather was glad he got to see you play, too."

Robert Adams clapped a hand on JoJo's shoulder. "Wish you'd been there to see it, Joe. Your nephew here is a real chip off the old block."

"I promise to make next week's game," Joey said.

"We'll just see about that," Mark said quickly. "So, are they gonna move you to a regular room?"

"Not until tomorrow. No complications, just being cautious," Joey added quickly.

"I can't believe how much better you look now than last night," Robert said. "You were a pitiful sight."

Joey's eyes met Mark's. He knew it would be a long time before Mark would be able to forget seeing his brother gunned down. He knew how he would feel had the reverse happened. He looked back at his father. "I'm getting better by the minute."

"That's good. I'll probably stick around a few more days and then I've got to get back to San Francisco," Robert said.

"I understand," Joey said. "I'll keep you posted on my progress."

Mark watched as Joey's eyes fluttered closed. He leaned close. "Hey, bro, so, I'm gonna run them home real quick, and I'll be back to stay with you for a while."

Joey opened his eyes. "Sorry, I keep drifting off."

"It's all the good drugs. Just rest."

Joey nodded. Slept.

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2 Thessalonians 3:3

"But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you
and guard you against the evil one."

Chapter Fourteen

It'd been a week. A week since Mark had shown up at her door because he had to come and make sure she was okay. A week since Joey had walked down the steps at the municipal courthouse and been blown away by some crazy guy. A man, Bella had recently learned, who had beaten up his wife. Would the madness never end?

Mark had asked her to keep hope alive. He'd told her he had a plan. That he would need some time. About a week, he'd said. Hold on and they'd be able to overturn Judge Latham's order of custody. Of course, she couldn't hold him to that week, not with Joey being shot. Still, she wondered just how much longer it would be.

Gordon had begun to revert to his old ways. She'd known he would but she hadn't expected it so soon. It seemed ever since the shooting incident, he'd been more and more agitated. She admitted she was getting a little nervous. She'd lost some of her aplomb. Part of the reason for that is the little suspicion that had crept into her mind. Gordon had been so pleased about Joey's circumstance and yet so discomposed since then that she'd begun to suspect he'd had a hand in it. Did he hire someone to shoot Joey? And are the authorities onto him and that's why he's acting so strange?

All weekend and Monday Gordon had yelled at her for every little thing. She'd tried to steer clear but it seemed he was over her shoulder every time she looked. He had that look in his eyes, like he needed to hit something. Last night, she'd tried to get some of her clothing out of the dresser in his room. She hadn't even thought about moving her things with everything else going on. She wished now she had, because when he'd caught her in his room he took that to mean she was willing and able, and she most definitely was not.

She ran her hands over her arms as she thought about what almost happened on Monday. He'd been drinking and he'd pulled her down onto the bed. She'd wrestled away but he didn't give up and came after her. She'd yelled at him and he'd yelled back and grabbed her. She'd

tried to get away but he was too strong. It was Logan coming in that had saved her. He'd opened the door to the bedroom and simply said, "Dad, leave her alone. Please."

It had been enough to stop him. That time. Who knows what the future held? She'd thought about calling Mark today, and ask him if there had been any progress but she didn't want to put any pressure on him and she didn't want him to know that things were becoming challenging on her end.

Mark Adams was a good man and she trusted him. He'd said he'd get her out and he would. She missed him terribly though. Getting that one taste of what it would be like to have him in her life was like giving one drop of water to someone dying of thirst. Her heart overflowed with love for him. Her body yearned for his touch. She just had to get through.

She looked over the dining room table to be sure everything was as it should be. She didn't want to rile Gordon now when she was so close to getting out. Dinner was in the oven. She'd made hors d'oeuvres and had the makings for martinis ready. She glanced at the clock.

Normally, it being Wednesday, she and Logan would be leaving for their martial arts class and Gordon would be going out to the club or playing a round of golf. This time though, he'd refused to allow them to go. When she'd suggested that he allow at least Logan to continue to participate, he'd had a tirade.

"How can you even think I would allow you and Logan to go back to martial arts classes," he'd said.

"But, Logan is doing so well," she'd argued.

He'd grabbed her by the arm, pulled her close. "I don't care how well he's doing. My son is not gonna learn another thing from one of those cocky Kinos. Too bad a stray bullet didn't hit your instructor."

Bella sighed as she remembered the vehemence with which he'd spoken. At least he hadn't gone back on his word to give Logan some time to be with friends. Logan had used his newfound freedom to join the flag football team since he was too late to join the regular middle school team. They met at the school three days a week. Today, Logan had come home, eaten a snack, and ridden his bike back up to the school. He wouldn't be home until five-thirty.

Bella smiled as she thought about her very grown up eleven-year-

old son. She'd noticed that he stayed on the phone a lot lately. At first she thought it might be a girlfriend. She'd finally asked him and he'd told her it was JoJo and Eric. That was even better. She was glad they were staying friends.

She jumped when she heard the garage door opening. Drawing a deep breath she prepared for whatever was to come.

Gordon came in the door with a scowl on his face. "What are you smiling about like some village idiot," he barked.

Bella tried not to let him get to her. "I was just trying to offer you a pleasant greeting. Did you have a bad day?"

He looked at her suspiciously. "I had a very bad day. I'm still having to pick up the slack for the moron who left the firm. You'd think one of the other partners would help out, but the fat cats have gotten lazy. I swear if I have to spend one more day in court with that freakin' Judge Mayfield who just can't stop singing the praises of your little boyfriend, I just might go crazy."

"My boyfriend?"

"You know exactly who I'm talking about. That cocky Mark Adams. Master Mark as you and Logan call him."

Bella kept her head down. "I told you, it's not like that."

"Yeah, so you've said. Now take my briefcase to my office and get me my drink."

"Of course," she muttered.

She couldn't keep her hands from shaking as she measured the gin into the shaker. She knew she was falling back into the cycle but she didn't know how to stop it. She finished the drink, picked up the tray of appetizers and headed into the den where he was lying on the chaise lounge, watching the news.

Handing him the glass, she carefully set the tray down on the coffee table. "I, uh, thought you might like some appetizers."

He grunted, sat up and reached for one, eyeing her as he did. "You thinking about going somewhere?"

Her brow furrowed. "No."

"Why are you so dressed up?"

"I'm not."

"Compared to how you've been looking you are."

"I'm feeling a little better so I guess I took a little more time with my appearance today."

His eyes traveled over her. “Can’t even tell you had a bruise on your face anymore.”

She touched her own cheek. “Yeah, isn’t it amazing how fast the human body can heal.”

He reached out and grabbed the hem of the skirt she wore, tugged until she had no choice but to move toward him. Once she was close enough he placed his hand on her leg.

She swallowed hard, tried for the stern face she’d thought she’d perfected until now. “Gordon, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Don’t play innocent with me. You know exactly what I’m doing. It’s time you and me made amends.”

“We have made amends. We’re living in the same house amiably, taking care of our son.”

“I’m talking about you and me. I have to admit, not being able to have you makes me appreciate you. You’re actually very pretty, in a simple sort of way. I want you, Bella, and I think you want me too, or you wouldn’t be getting all dressed up and flaunting yourself.”

“I’m not flaunting myself.”

He let go of her to grab more hors d’oeuvres. She took advantage of that and immediately stepped away. “Dinner is ready whenever you are.” She quickly left the room.

She busied herself in the kitchen while she tried to calm herself. Finishing up the last minute details, she spooned butter onto the steamed broccoli. When she looked up, she was surprised to find Gordon leaning against the doorjamb between the dining room and kitchen, watching her. Her hands began to shake again. The kitchen door burst open and Logan came in.

“Hi, Mom.” He immediately noticed his father standing in the dining room. “Dad,” he said quietly.

“Hi, Logan,” Bella said cheerfully. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Okay, I’ll go wash and be right down.”

He looked over at his father and back at his mom before he took the stairs two at a time.

Bella drew a steadying breath. Hopefully, with Logan home, Gordon will get out of his amorous mood.

Logan hurried back down the steps and rushed into the kitchen. His father had already taken a seat at the dining room table. “Is there anything I can help with, Mom?”

"Just grab that pitcher of water and that will be it," she said softly.

He did as instructed and poured water for his father before he set the pitcher on the table.

Bella placed the pasta bowl containing shrimp marinara on Gordon's left and the salad bowl on his right. The bread was already on the table.

Gordon smiled, breathed deeply. "This smells delicious."

Both Logan and Bella stilled. Bella had been placing her napkin in her lap. Her eyes met Gordon's. Logan had been taking his seat. He looked from his father to his mother and back again.

Swallowing, Bella smoothed her napkin and took some bread from the basket. Her hand shook as she placed the bread on her plate. She knew Gordon would never compliment the dinner like that. So, he hadn't rid himself of the notion that he and she should 'make amends.' He complimented the meal as his idea of foreplay. He had certain intentions in his mind and there was nothing she was going to be able to do to stop him. If she tried, it would become something much worse. And Logan, oh, Logan would try to intervene again. Only this time, Gordon wouldn't be surprised by that, he'd be ready and who knew what would happen. Would he hurt his own son?

Bella tried to act normal. She tried to eat. Gordon ate quietly while his eyes continually roamed over her. Logan obviously didn't realize what was going on, but he knew something was up.

When the meal was finally drawing to an end, Bella stood. "I've made a delicious blonde brownie for dessert," she announced.

"Sit down, Bella. You don't need to wait on Logan like he's some kind of king."

"B– but don't you want any dessert?"

"Oh, I do. And it's about time I got some."

Bella swallowed hard. "Gordon, please don't..."

"Logan, go in the kitchen and get yourself some dessert and eat it in your room."

Logan looked back and forth between his parents, trying to figure out what was going on.

"Now!"

He looked to his mother. She nodded at him.

Slowly, Logan left the table carrying his dishes.

"Now, then, like I said earlier, Bella, it's time you and I make

amends, and you know exactly what I'm talking about."

"Gordon, I know you don't love me, and I don't love you. I'm telling you 'no' plain and simple. My body is mine and I don't want to have sex with you."

He plastered a smile on his face. "Let's just talk about that a moment. I'm allowing you to live in my house so that you can be close to your son. I have to deal with seeing you flaunt yourself every day, every night. I'm a red-blooded, virile man, Bella. You certainly can't expect me to live with you and not be able to make love to my wife."

Tears welled in her eyes. "It's not making love, Gordon. You don't love me. And I do expect it. I expect to be able to tell you 'no' and you abide by that."

"That's not gonna happen, Bella. I've taken all I'm gonna take from you and your little boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"I don't believe you, Bella." He stood, moved around behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Listen to me closely. We can do this one of two ways. You can stand up and walk up those stairs with me, or I can drag you up there."

"I'll never go with you willingly. Never."

"That's fine by me," he said agreeably. "You know I like it rough."

A tear ran over her cheek. "Please don't do this, Gordon."

"Ahh, the sniveling little cry baby is back." He moved his hands over her shoulders. She placed her hands on his to stop him.

"I won't let you do this."

"Put your hands by your side or I start yelling and I guarantee your little boy will come running."

Defeat settling in, her eyes closed as she moved her hands from his.

"Mom?" Logan said, poking his head in from the kitchen.

Bella gasped.

"Logan, go upstairs like I told you," Gordon said sharply.

"Mom, what's going on?"

Gordon whirled toward his son.

"Logan, go upstairs!" Bella screamed. "Just go! Now! Please!"

Logan stood for a moment, confusion and indecision evident on his face. He didn't want to leave his mother.

"Please, Logan," Bella cried softly. "Go. Go in your room and

close the door and don't come out no matter what."

He turned and ran upstairs.

Bella stood, ready to fight.

Gordon grabbed her by the hair, twisted her arm behind her back, turned her around and forced her up the stairs. She struggled against his strength, but it was too much. It felt as if her arm would break. When he got her to the room, she grabbed the doorknob with her free hand and wouldn't let go, but he jerked her hard, pulled her inside and slammed the door.

"I hate you," Bella hissed at him. "One day you'll pay for this. I promise you that you will pay."

He only laughed at her.

Logan sat on the floor in his room, his back against the door, his hands covering his ears. What was he supposed to do? What? His mom told him to stay in his room no matter what. Why? Because she didn't want his help? Because she was worried that he would get hurt? His father was forcing his mom. That much he understood.

He heard muffled cries. He heard thumps and bumps. He heard grunts and groans. What was he supposed to do? What would JoJo and Eric do? What would Master Mark want him to do? He told him once to obey his mother no matter what. Is that what he'd have him do right now? He felt like such a coward. He should be helping his mother. He should be doing something.

Maybe he should call Master Mark, but his mom had said she didn't want to call him and bother him because he was so worried about Joey right now. He sat there for what seemed forever. The other room had become quiet. Thankfully, it was over.

Logan rose, crossed to his bed, threw himself down. Pulling the pillow over his head, he cried himself to sleep.

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The meeting took place in Joey's hospital room on Thursday evening. Shelley, Bree and Breez sat in the only chairs available. Mark sat on the end of Joey's bed while Jeffy sat on the side. Ricky leaned against the back wall and Jason leaned against the door. Eric leaned against the window ledge. JoJo, Eric and Taylor were being treated to organic pizza for dinner by Justin and Lori.

It had been a week and one day since Joey had taken two bullets on the courthouse steps. A week and one day since Mark had promised

Bella he'd get her custody of Logan. Joey would be out of the hospital by Sunday. Bella would have her custody order by tomorrow.

"So, Joey's instincts were right on," Mark continued. "Gordon had a great deal on Judge Latham."

"Like what?" Shelley asked.

"Well, Joey thought it was strange that Latham lived in a small house in Lynwood. Jeff found that he actually was living with a young woman named Shanda Gold."

"Young? How young?" Bree asked.

"She's eighteen."

Bree frowned. "Certainly old enough then."

Mark nodded. "So it would seem, but there's much more to it. I finally convinced Latham's ex-wife to speak with me. She told me they'd been divorced for two years and she got everything, the house, two of three cars and custody of the kids who are now thirteen, fifteen and sixteen."

"He was having an affair and so she had leverage?" Breez asked.

"Oh, yes, but it's even worse. He was having an affair with a fifteen-year-old girl."

"Did he know she was underage?"

"Since she was brought before him in his court as a truant, I'd say the answer is 'yes.' Apparently, so his ex-wife says, he took one look at this young girl and fell head over heels for her. He went a little crazy. He put everything he had in jeopardy just to be with her, and so he gave his wife everything in the divorce to keep her quiet."

"So, the wife knew he was breaking the law and she didn't turn him in?" Shelley asked.

"That was the deal," Mark said with a nod.

"Well then, she's no better than him," Shelley said with disgust. "Judge Latham's wife sold out on a young girl for the price of a fancy home and some cars."

Joey sighed. "And this young girl is the same woman he's now living with?" Joey asked.

Mark nodded. "Yes. He moved to a small home in a neighborhood where he thought he'd be able to go unnoticed. And he has for three years. Then Gordon Landow found out about the good judge and has used that knowledge to get Latham to do his bidding."

"Good work," Jason said.

"It was mostly Joey and Jeff," Mark stated. "Anyway, Judge Hovan will be presented with all of this information first thing in the morning. I already have an appointment to meet with him in chambers. Latham's order of custody will be rescinded and I'm guessing he'll be disciplined. I'll take the new custody order straight to Bella and get her and Logan out of there."

"Thank God," Breez uttered, her eyes moist.

"Has anyone spoken to Bella lately?" Bree asked.

"I called her earlier today but she said she was very busy and couldn't talk," Mark said. "She sounded strange. It makes me nervous."

"I called her too," Breez added. "She sounded pretty down. Thank goodness she'll be out of there tomorrow."

"Where will she go?" Shelley asked.

All eyes turned to Mark.

"I think it would be best for her to get her feet under her for a while instead of rushing into anything else. Besides, it would look bad for her to leave Gordon and come to my house to stay. I think she should stay with Breez for a while, get used to being single."

"You just proved that your feelings for her are genuine," Breez said. "I'm so glad she has you in her life."

Mark smiled. "Glad I met with your approval."

"Well, *I* got a problem with them staying at Breez's house," Joey said, surprising everyone.

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He pounded on her bedroom door.

"Go away," Bella said. "I'm not well."

"Bella, you'd better open this door right now."

She sat on the floor in the far corner of the room where she'd been sitting all day. Except for the times she'd been in the bathroom puking up her guts. Logan had come straight in from school to check on her. She'd convinced him she had a virus. Told him to go play ball. Reluctantly, he'd obeyed.

Of course, she didn't have a virus. Her body was reacting to the images that'd been running through her brain all day. Images of what Gordon had done to her last night.

"I swear, Bella, open this door or I'm gonna break it down."

"I'm sick, Gordon. Leave me alone. Please," she added with just the right amount of humility.

All became quiet. She breathed a sigh of relief. He'd given up. Thank goodness. He'll have to fend for himself for his dinner tonight. She looked around the room where she'd imprisoned herself. Life had become a true nightmare. She closed her eyes. Mark, you're all I have left, she thought. You're my only hope. Please, come and get me.

Then she realized she was being a wimp. Sitting around, waiting for Mark to rescue her, waiting to see what kind of mood Gordon is in each day. Playing roulette with her and Logan's lives. She couldn't sit around and wait anymore. She had to take action. She'd told Gordon she'd never take Logan and try to make a run for it, but that was before he'd drug her up to his room last night and committed so many atrocities against her. Her stomach heaved as the memories came again.

Startled, she gasped at the large bang on the door. It sounded like he kicked it. Thankfully the door held. Good. He can't get in.

"Bella, you open this door right now!" he screamed.

She shuddered. He was really mad now. He must've hurt his foot trying to kick it in.

Another large bang. And another and another. Finally, something cracked. Bella stood, holding her breath. There was nowhere for her to run. She could hide in the closet or under the bed or in the bathtub, but he'd find her fast enough.

Two more kicks, another loud cracking sound and then the door came crashing in. He stood in the doorway, breathing hard, his eyes glittering with rage as he looked at her.

"Go away, Gordon," she said again. "I'm sick."

"I'm not going away, Bella. You're gonna pay for locking me out."

"It's my room. Not yours."

"It's my house."

"It's mine too, and let me remind you that my parents helped us to get it," she threw back.

"You little..." he said as he came forward. He grabbed her by the arm. "Come on, let's go."

She struggled to pull her arm away. "Where are you taking me?"

"We're gonna head into our bedroom and have some more fun. I can't get last night out of my head."

"No!" she screamed at him and finally jerked away. "It's not gonna happen. Do you think you're gonna just come home every day now and have your way with me? Use me like some blow-up doll?"

He reached for her. "Don't touch me," she said as she dodged him.

He eyed her slowly. "You know what, Bella?"

"What," she spat.

"I think you've been lying to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said nervously.

"I think you do."

She closed her eyes briefly, shook her head. "Please, Gordon, leave me alone. I don't feel well."

"You're not a very good liar, Bella."

"I'm not lying!" she yelled with frustration.

"Maybe not about the being sick part, but you are about you and your boyfriend. You've been different, Bella. I've been thinking a lot about this. You've been different ever since I went away for the weekend. You know what I think, Bella? I think while I was away taking care of business, you met up with your little kung fu master."

"Taking care of business? You were off for the weekend with that woman from the club."

"So, you don't deny it?" Gordon said, his jaw clenching in rage.

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"I agree with Joey," Jason said. "I don't think they should stay with Breez either. At this point I think it's safe to say that Gordon may not be too stable. He's obviously capable of violence and he was bold enough, or stupid enough to try to get into Joey's room last week. I wouldn't put it past him to try to get to Bella or Logan, or even hiring someone else to do his dirty work. Joey could stay at Breez's house once he gets out of the hospital, but, he's not up to par yet, much less, back to his super hero self."

Mark grinned at Joey who only shook his head.

"We could place an agent there," Shelley suggested.

Eric nodded. "We could, or, they can just come stay with us."

Shelley and Jeffy both clapped their hands together.

"Oh, yes," Shelley said. "That would be perfect!"

"It would be fantastic," Jeffy agreed. "They'd be perfectly safe at our house."

"You'd still have to up your security level," Jason said.

Eric nodded. "We'll up it all the way to red if you think that's what we need."

"At least orange," Jason said dryly.

Eric chuckled.

"Oh, wonderful," Jeffy said. "I so want to get to know them better." She glanced at Mark. "Is that okay with you?"

"It's great with me."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I don't know. Just anxious I guess." He turned to Breez. "What about you?"

"As long as they're safe, that's all that matters."

"Is there any other family business, news, announcements anyone wants to share before we go our separate ways?"

Several people tried to speak. Then stopped. Then laughed.

"Joey, you go first," Eric said.

"I was gonna point out that the Kino Challenge is in six weeks and I obviously won't be participating this year, so we're gonna need to get someone to take my place and I nominate two people. Mark and Jeffy."

"You mean Jeff," Shelley corrected.

"No, I mean Jeffy."

Jeffy grinned. "I'm interested. Please explain."

Joey shrugged. "First, about Mark. I think he's the logical choice to replace me."

Mark shook his head. "I don't have the killer instinct you have."

"If you're saying it's not for you, I understand and so be it. If you're just too lazy to accept the challenge, then I got a problem with that."

Mark sighed. "I have a lot going on right now and training for the challenge would be a huge undertaking. I know you know that."

"It would be a huge outlet," Ricky added.

Everyone turned to listen to Ricky.

"Remember the first challenge, what was going on. Training for the challenge not only helped relieve my stress, but it helped the entire family to focus on something challenging." He shrugged. "We're all used to Joey winning. It would be great to focus on helping you to win."

Mark smiled. "And what if I don't?"

"Don't what? Don't compete or don't win?"

"What if I don't win?"

"Man, Mark, listen to yourself. That doesn't sound like you at all. What happened to your competitive edge? I know you used to have

one," Ricky said.

"It was certainly there a few weeks ago when he joined me in the ring," Joey added. "Then again, maybe Mark considers himself in the 'I'm a lover not a fighter' category."

Mark sighed. "Okay, you guys. You want me to fight in the challenge, then I will. But training will have to take place on nights and weekends."

"Awesome," Joey said. "I already feel more focused."

Mark looked up. "Okay, well, I know you all want to get in on this but Eric is the one to train me, so, he can give everyone else their assignments. I," he began as he stood and bowed, "am your puppet and your honored student."

"Woo hoo," Shelley said.

"So what about me, Joey? What did you have in mind?" Jeffy asked.

He smiled at his sister. "I was thinking, we have a female MART champion as a mom, and a fabulous martial artist trained by the legendary Grandmaster Kino as a sister. Why haven't we had a female division in the Kino challenge?"

"Good question," Shelley said with a nod.

"Oh, this would be so cool," Jeffy said with glee.

"I'm sure there would be no shortage of women who would like to climb into that ring with Jeffy," Joey continued.

"Last year's MART champion for one," Shelley said. "And the runner up. As a matter of fact, I can think of five or six names right off the bat."

"If she fights, I don't want her taking on more than two opponents," Eric said firmly.

"I agree," Joey, Mark, Ricky and Jason all said at the same time.

Jeffy folded her arms with a pout. "Fine."

"So, we have our work cut out for us," Eric said, his eyes glowing with excitement and pride.

Shelley smiled up at him. He was now in his element.

Jason glanced at his watch. "Who else had something to discuss? Ricky, didn't you start to say something?"

"I was gonna let everyone know that Bree just signed on to do a movie," Ricky offered.

"Really? What's it about?" Shelley asked.

"I will be playing a scientist slash doctor, who is on the verge of discovering the cure for cancer which makes me a target."

Jeffy clapped her hands together. "That's so awesome, Bree! That's exactly what I'm gonna do, except I'm gonna do it in real life."

"I totally believe that, Jeffy," Bree said.

"Go ahead," Ricky prodded. "Tell them who's playing the hero in the film."

Bree smiled slyly. "It's Dayton Hemingway."

"Woo hoo," Breez said.

"Feeling a little threatened, are ya, Rick?" Joey laughed.

"Not even slightly."

"I dunno," Mark said. "I've heard Hemingway has a knack for falling in love with his leading ladies."

"And I would expect no less working opposite Bree. The question is— will Bree fall in love with him and I've already threatened them both, so, we're good."

Everyone laughed.

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"Why should I deny it?" Bella returned. "You keep calling him my boyfriend no matter what I say. You're gonna believe what you want anyway. Why should I waste my breath?"

He moved closer, grasped her upper arms firmly. Bella looked up at him defiantly. "Let me go."

"Tell me, Bella, what was it like, huh? What was it like to be with another man?"

"Gordon, stop. Let go, you're hurting me."

His jaw clenched. "No, I'm not gonna stop. You are coming with me." He jerked her forward.

"No!" she screamed. "I won't go with you. You're not doing that to me again." She let her body go limp, fell to the floor.

He stopped, bent over her. "I'll drag you if I have to." He tried to grab her by the hands but she started swinging with all her might. He dodged her fists and moved to simply pick her up, but she swung around and kicked, over and over as if she were in a swimming pool. She realized she looked like a child throwing a fit, but she didn't care. She kicked and hit and tried to crawl away, but he grabbed her by the hair.

Bella groaned in pain as he used her hair to lift her to her feet. He

wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her kicking and screaming out of her bedroom, down the hall and into his room. He let go to shove her toward the bed, but she caught herself, backed away from the bed and from him.

A few more steps back and she'd be at her dresser, she thought. Then, if she could edge to the right, she could make it through the doorway. She could run down the stairs and through the dining room, pull chairs down to block him. Maybe that would give her just enough time to get out the back door and get to a neighbor's house.

He stood there, a sick smile on his face, watching her back away from him. "Oh, yeah," he said with a sneer. "You've been lying. Did you like it, Bella? Admit it. Just admit it. You've been with him. How did he talk you into his bed, huh? Did he tell you he loved you? How did he get you to commit adultery? Because that's what you did, Bella. You committed adultery. Do you think the courts would've ever given you custody after what you've done?"

"You committed adultery. You!" she yelled.

He stepped closer. "Did he come over here or did you go to him?"

She shook her head as the tears coursed down her cheeks. "No, Gordon, no, he didn't..."

"Then you went to him? You met him somewhere or you went to his house. Did you take my son with you?"

She shook her head. "No, Gordon, you're wrong."

"I don't think so. You're lying to me, Bella and I'm gonna get the truth out of you. I know you've been with Mark Adams. I know you've committed adultery. Now I just want to know where and how. So, where, Bella? Was it at a hotel, or were you a little more discreet than that? A dirty motel? Or, was it at his house? Did you take my son to his house and then go into the bedroom?"

She shook her head. "No, Gordon."

"No, you didn't go into the bedroom or no you didn't take my son?"

"I, I didn't take Logan."

Gordon felt as if his head was gonna explode. So, she did exactly what he'd suspected. She was gonna pay for it.

"You didn't take Logan, but you did commit adultery, didn't you!" he hollered. "You did!"

"Okay, yes I did," she screamed back at him. "I did. I made love

with Mark Adams. Made love. Something you will never understand. And you know what Gordon, I had no idea it could be that good. It was nothing like when you grunt and ease yourself on me. He's a real man. He's everything a man should be which means he's nothing like you. You could never measure up to him, not as far as honor and strength and definitely not in inches. It was good, Gordon. So good, and I can't wait to do it again," she screamed.

He screamed profanities at her just before he backhanded her.

Bella flew several feet before she landed on the soft, white carpet. She got to her knees, tried to crawl toward the door, but Gordon lifted her by the hair, drew back his fist and punched. She crashed back against her dresser, knocking over perfume bottles and a crystal vase. She fell to the floor in a heap.

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"Okay, well, Justin and the boys will be back anytime now so is there any other business?" Eric asked.

"JoJo has a game next Thursday at five if anyone wants to come," Mark said.

"We'll be there," Shelley assured him.

"That reminds me," Ricky said. "Eric made the academic team at school and they're competing in the first week of December."

"Awesome," Jeffy said.

"Tell him we're very proud of him," Eric said.

"By the way, how is he feeling?" Jeffy asked. "No more headaches?"

"No. He's feeling pretty good."

"Oh, guess who's gonna sing at the Kino challenge next month," Shelley asked.

"Carrie Underwood?" Joey ventured.

Shelley laughed. "No, but just as good. Our own Lizzy Tanner."

"Oh, I'm so excited. I can't wait to see them again," Jeffy said. "Do you think the whole crew will come?"

"More than likely," Shelley answered. "Your father is in love with those little girls."

"Well, those girls are not so little anymore," Jason put in. "Heather is what, sixteen?"

"She's fifteen," Shelley corrected.

Jeffy smiled. "Oh, wow, that's the age I was when I went to Seattle

and tried to talk to Rissa and went to a motel room with Cam and tried to..." Jeffy stopped, looked around at the comical expressions on everyone's faces, and blushed. "I mean, uh, well, you know."

Eric rolled his eyes. "Yes, we all know."

"We just wanted to see if you were actually gonna say it," Bree said.

"I guess I still need to work on the little problem I have with saying too much," Jeffy said with a laugh.

"I guess you do," Mark said. He stood as his phone began to vibrate. He pulled it from his pocket, glanced at the caller ID, held his hand up for silence and put the call on speaker. "Bella?"

She sniffed loudly. "Mark. I..."

He waited but she didn't go on. "Bella, talk to me, baby, what's happened? Are you okay?"

She sniffed again. "Mark," she whispered. "I need you."

"I'm on my way. Bella, can you tell me what's happened? Did Gordon hurt you? Is he still there?"

Breez stood and gathered her purse.

"Bella?" Mark said again as he moved toward the door.

"He's dead," she finally said.

Mark stopped in his tracks and turned to face his family. "What? What did you just say?"

"He's dead, Mark. I killed him."

"Okay. Okay. How? How did you kill him?"

"I shot him."

"Are you sure he's dead?"

"No. I called 911. They're on the way. I told them what I did."

Mark blew out a breath. Her voice was so distant, as if she were in a trance. "Bella listen to me. Don't– say– anything to anyone else. Nothing without your attorney present. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

"It was self-defense. Say that back to me. What did I just say?"

"It was self-defense," she mimicked.

"Good. I'm on my way. Hold tight."

He ended the call and looked up at the shocked faces. "Jason, I'm gonna need your pull with the police department."

Jason nodded. "I'm right behind you."

"And call Justin for me. Tell him I'm over my head."

"I'll have him with me. Now go."

Mark nodded, started out.

"Wait, Mark, I'm coming too. I'll follow you," Breez said.

He nodded. "Let's go."

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It seemed to take forever to get to the Landow home. By the time they did, the place was surrounded by police and bystanders. An ambulance and a blue and white coroner's van were in the driveway, neither yet occupied.

Mark and Breez rushed toward the porch steps, but were stopped.

"Sorry, you can't go in," an officer said.

"I'm her sister," Breez said.

"Sorry, ma'am."

"I'm her lawyer," Mark offered.

The officer spoke into his mic then nodded at Mark. "Go ahead. They're in the front room."

Mark moved quickly up the steps and into the house. He looked to the left. Bella sat on the sofa, her face bloody, her hair in disarray, her clothes torn. A man knelt in front of her, talking to her. When Mark approached, the man stood, held out his hand.

"I'm Detective Mooney. You're her lawyer?"

"Yes," Mark said as he shook hands. "Mark Adams."

"Well, Mr. Adams, let me just say before you get all bent out of shape, it looks like a clear case of self-defense."

Mark blew out a breath, nodded. "He put her in the hospital a little over a week ago."

"Yeah, we have record of that. And one of the officers here tonight was here that night too."

Mark knelt down, looked her over. Her eyes were blank. Her throat had bruises. There were claw marks on her chest. Her shirt had been torn from her body and was hanging on by the sleeves. Mark took off his jacket and placed it around Bella's shoulders. "How ya doin?"

She began to cry. "I'm so sorry. He, he just wouldn't stop. I thought he was gonna kill me, I thought I was gonna die, and then, I remembered the gun, the one Breez gave me."

"Where was the gun?" Detective Mooney asked.

Mark cleared his throat. "Uh, Detective, I'm assuming you've Mirandized Ms. Landow?"

He frowned. "Not yet."

"Then, may I have a minute to confer with my client?"

The detective nodded.

"Thank you. Oh, and the head of my law firm should be here soon. His name is Justin Lee. Could you please have the officer outside allow him entrance when he arrives?"

Sighing, the detective nodded, turned and left the room.

Mark pulled a chair up in front of Bella and sat. He looked into her eyes. "Bella, look at me. Focus on what I'm saying."

She blinked and made eye contact.

"It's probably best that you not mention that you and I have a relationship other than attorney/client. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Speak, Bella. Yes or no? Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"I want to hold you, Bella. I want to comfort you, but I think it's best that I keep my distance. Okay, sweetie?"

She nodded.

"I want you to tell me and Justin what happened, but first I'm gonna get a paramedic in here to take a look at you."

"I'm okay, I already told them that."

"You don't look okay and you're in shock, but even if you are okay, I'm gonna have them examine you anyway, because I need to waste time until Jason and Justin get here."

"Oh. All right."

Mark stood and found Detective Mooney. "I haven't been able to talk to her yet. She appears to be in shock. I want to have a paramedic take a look at her first to make sure she doesn't pass out on me."

"Fine." The detective motioned to an officer. "Send one of the paramedics in here to see Ms. Landow." He looked back at Mark. "I'll be upstairs when she's ready to talk."

"Thank you."

They both looked up to see two men coming down the steps carrying a stretcher. On the stretcher was a body draped by a sheet. Both the body and the sheet were snug under web strapping. Mark tried not to let it get to him. This was Gordon, a man Mark had said he'd like to kill, and now the man really was dead, but it had been sweet, passive Bella who'd done the killing. Mark shook his head to clear it.

"You knew him?" Detective Mooney asked.

Mark nodded. "Yes, I mean, casually. He's a criminal defense attorney. We don't really run in the same circles, but I've seen him in court and at a few social events."

"So then, how did you become Ms. Landow's attorney, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I teach martial arts at the Kino studio over on Brookshire. She brought her son, Logan, in to sign up about two years ago. I gave her my card because it seemed to me she needed legal representation."

"Mom! Mom!"

"Speaking of Logan," Mark said.

They looked out. An officer was trying to keep Logan from coming inside the house.

"Let him in," Detective Mooney said.

"Mom!" Logan said as he ran up the steps.

Mark stopped him.

"Where's Mom? Is she okay? Mom!"

"She's okay, Logan. Calm down now. Logan," Mark said as he bent down. "Some bad things have happened."

"Mom's okay?" he asked again.

"Yes. Your mom's gonna be fine, but your father," Mark paused, looked up at the detective before he continued. "Your father is dead."

Logan blinked. "Dead?"

Mark nodded.

Logan leaned against Mark, turned his face against his chest then quickly looked back up. "Can I see my mom?"

Mark nodded. "She's in there."

He watched as Logan ran toward the sofa where Bella sat. A paramedic was taking her blood pressure, but Bella held her arms out and gathered her son to her.

They held each other and they cried together. She pulled him back to look at his face, brushed his tears aside. "Everything's gonna be okay," she said softly. She brushed at his shirt. "Look now, I've gotten blood on you."

"It's okay, Mom." He hugged her again. "Mom, Master Mark says Dad is dead."

She nodded. Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry, Logan."

Mark looked back over his shoulder. Detective Mooney nodded.

"I'll be upstairs."

A few minutes later Jason and Justin arrived. They were allowed in. The paramedic was just finishing up with Bella. They'd placed a bandage on a small cut just above her right eyebrow. She held an ice pack to her nose which was still trickling blood.

Justin sat on the chair that Mark had pulled up in front of Bella.

"Logan, why don't you come with me. Your Aunt Breez is outside," Mark said.

Logan followed Mark outside. Breez was sitting on the steps. Logan sat down beside his aunt. She huddled close and put her arms around him. Mark went back inside.

"Bella," Justin said. "I'm Justin Lee. I met you at the belt party a few weeks ago."

She nodded. "I remember you. You're Jason's brother."

He smiled. "Right. I'm also the senior partner at Mark's law firm and I want you to tell me what happened."

She swallowed hard. "It's all such a blur."

"Can you try?"

She nodded. "He, he came home. He was mad because I'd locked myself in my room."

"Why?"

"Why?" she asked.

"Why had you locked yourself in your room?"

"Oh." She sighed heavily. "Because..." she glanced at Mark. "Because of the night before. He, Gordon, he— did things to me."

Justin took her hand, patted it. "I know this is hard, Bella, but you have to tell me everything. It's important. What did he do to you?"

"He hurt me," she shook her head as the tears coursed down her cheeks. "He raped me over and over," she began.

Mark shook his head as she went on to describe other atrocities.

She looked up at him, the shame in her eyes. "I tried to fight him but he was too strong."

Justin drew her attention back. "Was Logan home?"

She nodded.

"Okay, so this evening, you were in your room?"

"Yes, I'd been sick, throwing up all day. He was angry and finally broke the door down. He intended to do it again."

"Do what again?"

"The same things he'd done the night before."

Justin cleared his throat. "He broke the door down. Then what?"

"He drug me into his bedroom. We fought. He choked me and he slapped me around. I fell against the dresser. I was on the floor and I thought I was probably gonna die this time and then suddenly, I remembered the gun. Breez gave me a gun a few weeks ago."

"We know. We have that on video," Jason said.

She looked up at him as if she just realized he was there.

"I'd put it in my bottom drawer, under my jeans. I never intended to use it, but once I remembered it was there it seemed my only way to survive. I opened the drawer and pulled it out. I remember looking at it, trying to remember what Breez had showed me."

"You didn't have to load it?"

"No. Breez said it wasn't any good if it wasn't loaded. I didn't really know what I was doing. I turned around to face him and Gordon saw the gun and he actually backed away. I remember thinking, good, I won't have to actually fire it. He'll leave me alone now. But then he started laughing and he came at me again."

She stopped, closed her eyes.

"Go ahead, Bella," Justin said softly.

"He said, 'you won't shoot me. You're too pathetic.'" She shrugged. "And so, I fired."

"Where did it hit him?"

"It didn't. I missed him completely. I think I hit the wall behind him. He looked back behind him like he was looking for where the bullet went and then he turned back toward me. He was really mad that I'd actually fired the gun. He came at me. I fired again and hit him in the arm. I thought maybe he would stop then, but he was madder than ever. He kept coming toward me and I fired again."

Her voice trailed off as she remembered the scene.

"And? You hit him that time?"

She nodded. "It looked like the bullet hit him in the stomach. He fell down. I, I was afraid to move. I was afraid that somehow he was gonna stand back up and kill me, but then his eyes closed. I knew I needed to call 911 but I was afraid to step past him to get to the phone that was behind him on the nightstand, so I went back to the room where I've been staying and found my cell phone. I called 911 and told them I think I just killed my husband."

"Do you remember what else you said to them?" Jason asked.

"I was crying and I know I told them I thought he was gonna kill me. I told them I was sorry but I didn't know what else to do. They wanted me to take his pulse, see if he was still alive, but I told them I just couldn't. I was too afraid."

Justin nodded. Good. Proof she was afraid for her life, he thought. "And then?" he asked.

"Then I hung up and called Mark."

Justin nodded thoughtfully, sighed, and turned to Jason. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Jason nodded. "I think we have problems."

"Detective Mooney told me it looks like a clear case of self-defense," Mark offered.

"Yeah, but don't think that he's not watching carefully. He said that so you would let your guard down," Jason said. "Let me give you a scenario. First, it will be easy to find out that you and Bella are an item. Too many people know. So, the clever criminal defense attorney, that's you, and the pitiful abused wife, that's Bella, are an item and want to be together. But the mean, nasty husband has custody of the kid. What must be done to produce a happily ever after? The husband must be gotten rid of. Hmm, what can we do? Well, simply, it would be easy to provoke the husband into another fight. The gun has already been planted. How easy to make it look like self-defense."

"That's all speculation," Mark said. "There's no proof of that, and everyone also knows I was about to have the custody order overturned. I even already have an appointment with Judge Hovan."

"Yes, and thank goodness for that. Still, there's the celebrity thing."

"The celebrity thing?"

"Yeah, like, the boyfriend is none other than Ricky Kino's and Breanna Adams' brother. Now it's getting juicy. You know how tempting it is to arrest a celebrity."

"I am not a celebrity."

"Close enough. Ricky, Bree, and don't forget Joey. Now, your brother being gunned down a week ago could help or hurt," Jason said.

Frustrated, Mark raised his hands. "So what do you want to do?"

Justin nodded at Jason before he spoke. "I want us to be completely upfront and honest. I'm gonna go upstairs and talk to the

D.I.C. and let him in on our complete investigation from the beginning. Keep your fingers crossed and we might be able to avoid a scene like we went through with Ricky all those years ago."

Mark nodded. Many years ago when Bree had been shot, cops had shown up at the hospital to arrest Ricky. It had been a disturbing sight to say the least. That charge had been felony assault. This one would be murder for Bella and accessory to murder for him.

Jason and Justin walked upstairs together to find Detective Mooney. Mark stayed with Bella. She blinked at him. He took her hand. He had so much he wanted to say but it was definitely not the time or place.

"I'm so tired," she said softly.

"I'm sure. You're still gonna have to tell the story to the detectives so hold tough for just a little longer. Can you do that?"

She nodded. "Where's Logan?"

"He's with Breez out on the porch. I'll go get them."

A few seconds later both Logan and Breez came through the door. Mark watched, wishing with all his might that he could put his arms around Bella and comfort her. Since he couldn't, he was glad Breez and Logan were here.

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Romans 13:4

"For he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

Chapter Fifteen

Everyone was gone. Breez and Logan were at Breez's house. Bella had been taken to the hospital for treatment and Justin thought it would be better if he and his wife Lori were the ones to accompany her. Jason was back at his office gathering every piece of documentation he had on the Landow/Sheridan case. He would present it the next morning to the chief of police, with whom he had a reasonably amiable relationship.

Mark walked alone through the house, envisioning the story Bella had told. He could see it unfolding exactly as she said. The door to the bedroom she'd been using broken in. The room in shambles as Gordon fought with her to get her out and down the hall. Gordon's room torn apart. Broken glass on the dresser and floor. Blood everywhere. He found the bullet hole in the bathroom door frame, the first shot, the one she'd missed. The bullet had been removed and bagged.

The bed had been stripped. DNA evidence would be found, evidence of her story of what happened the previous night. It was too difficult to think of Bella, such a gentle soul, facing and enduring that kind of abuse. All he'd wanted to do since he arrived here earlier was to pull her into his arms and comfort her, hold her, tell her everything was gonna be okay now. Gordon was gone and they had their whole lives in front of them.

Even though Jason and Justin felt sure the cops would jump at the chance of arresting and prosecuting a member of the Ricky Kino/Breanna Adams family, they also felt just as sure that they had enough evidence to guarantee it wouldn't come to that.

Sighing, he sat down on the top step. He felt drained. Almost too tired to think. There had only been a few times in his life that he'd felt that way. And those times he'd done two things, the same two things he was about to do. Talk it out with God, and talk it out with his brother. Rising, he got in his car and talked to God while he drove to the hospital and headed for Joey's room.

The light was off when Mark eased the door open. He stood at the end of Joey's bed, thinking he shouldn't bother him. He should just go get JoJo from his mom's house and go home. He started to do just that when Joey stirred, stretched, spoke.

"Mark?"

"Yeah, hey, didn't mean to wake you. Go back to sleep."

"Don't go. I'm awake now."

Mark shrugged and nodded. "Okay." He pushed the big reclining chair up close to the bed.

Joey sighed. "So, I've been on the phone half the night trying to get some details."

"And did you get them?" Mark asked.

"Only that Bella shot Gordon in self-defense. He beat her up pretty bad. She's at the Medical Center and for some weird reason she's with Justin instead of you or Breez."

Mark shook his head and heaved a heavy sigh. "Yeah, well, Breez is taking care of Logan right now, so that's why she isn't at the hospital with Bella, and I'm not with her because they thought it would be best that Bella and I keep things cool."

Joey's brain began to compute. It took him only a minute before he looked up at Mark. "Conspiracy?"

Mark nodded. "To commit murder."

"They're charging you?"

"No. But Jason and Justin think it's entirely possible they could try to turn it that way."

Joey blew out a breath. "You've known each other a few years. You're interested in each other. Just need to get the jealous, controlling husband out of the way. What's the best way to do that? Instigate a fight and blow him away in self-defense."

Mark nodded. "I can hear the cell doors closing as we speak."

"Then again," Joey continued. "I have recorded conversations, Bella telling Breez about the abuse, Breez presenting Bella with the gun, Logan telling you about abuse. Nowhere in there does Bella mention you. We do have you, me and Breez over at the house cleaning when Gordon is out of town."

"I think I had the foresight then to realize we were being recorded. I don't think anything telling was said. Just a casual conversation between friends."

"Except for the part where you got her to leave with you and have dinner at your house."

"Yeah, yes I did. But– if you listen to the conversation I think you can tell that it was the first time she'd ever done anything like that. So that would throw out the part about planning this for two years."

"If Jason volunteers the surveillance tapes, he'll have to volunteer them all, not just the ones that show our side. I hope he listens very carefully to them to make sure nothing is incriminating."

Mark nodded. "That's exactly what he's doing right now."

They sat quietly as their minds went over the consequences of the worst case scenario.

"Are you afraid?" Joey finally asked.

"Not really. I mean, I could let myself get all worked up about it. If I go down, then that means Bella goes down too. Think what that would do to Logan. And if I go down, I can't even imagine what that would mean to JoJo. First never knowing his mother and then losing me. It's a freaking scary thought, but I just don't see that there's any proof of anything. They can speculate all they want but they can't prove it."

"Mark, don't be naive. People have been tried and convicted on pure outrage with no proof whatsoever."

Mark nodded. "Okay then, so, bro, are you saying you think they might go through with this?"

"I don't know, Mark. I do know that you're my brother and it would kill me if anything like that happened to you. Because it wouldn't just happen to you. It would happen to all of us. Mom, JoJo, Bree, Jeffy, Ricky, Eric, Dad, Eric and Taylor. I guess we'd have to secret you away and hide you somewhere."

Mark smiled. "You'd do that for me, huh?"

"Sure. New identity, new town. We can't let you do time. Not when you're innocent."

"Maybe not so innocent," Mark said.

"Hmm?"

"I mean, I wanted him dead. Every time I heard he'd hit Bella again, and what he did to her last night," he stopped, shook his head. "He deserved to die."

"What did he do last night?"

"Rape and sodomy, over and over, throughout the night."

Joey sadly shook his head.

Silence again as they imagined what Bella had endured.

Mark's thoughts turned to his brother. "So, putting all this aside, how are you feeling?"

"Good. Lucky. Grateful. And I heard they should be letting me out of here soon."

"I heard it would be two or three more days."

Joey frowned. "Yep, and then, Jason has me all lined up to complete my week in the accounting department, then on to human resources, then on to the geek squad, computers, technical equipment, which should actually be fairly interesting."

Mark smiled. "You'll get through. Just remember to keep that grateful attitude. Things could be much worse."

"I'll just be happy when we know you and Bella are clear and free to actually have a life."

"Me too."

"I feel responsible, you know."

"You? Why?"

"I neglected to get that gun back. I kept meaning to, but it seemed there just wasn't any time. Of course, there was. I just didn't make the time." He shook his head.

"If only this and if only that, you know that's not healthy, Joe."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Listen, if you *had* removed the gun, maybe Bella would be dead right now. I mean, she had bruises around her neck. He tried to strangle her. He'd totally lost control, that much was obvious. She really did need the gun for self-defense."

Joey nodded. "Well, then, I guess I'm glad it was there."

Mark smiled. "Yes, exactly, so forget all that other crap, because believe it or not, it's not always all about you, Joey."

Joey grinned.

Mark turned as the door opened and Jeffy walked in.

"Hi, Mark, I didn't expect to see you here. It's late."

He bent down and kissed her cheek. "Yeah, just having a little powwow with my little-er brother."

Jeffy grinned. "Little-er. Cute. Well, I'm about to start my shift but I wanted to check Joey over first."

Joey smiled. "See, Mark, it *is* all about me."

Jeffy moved to Joey's bedside, lowered the rail, looked him over, checked both wounds, nodded in satisfaction. She looked into his eyes, took his hand, then frowned. "You're upset."

"You're not supposed to be doing that, Jeffy," he complained.

"I wasn't even trying. I think I'm getting much better at it. I think I can look without draining myself."

"Well, look somewhere else, please."

"Why are you upset? Because of what Bella had to do?"

"That's part of it."

"What else?"

Joey nodded toward Mark. "Ask him."

She turned to Mark. "Well?"

"It's probably not gonna happen, but it seems they're looking at Bella and I for murder and accessory to murder."

He expected Jeffy to be upset and indignant, however, she wasn't. She merely smiled. "Let me take your hand," Jeffy said.

He rolled his eyes but held out his hand. Her body jerked for a second and he tried to pull away but she held tight. She calmed, closed her eyes. Finally she looked up at Mark's face.

"You love her very much."

He blew out a breath. "Yes, I do."

"There's no peril for you two. You won't be charged with anything. At least I think you won't."

"No peril, huh?" Mark said with a smile. "Well good. I'm glad all that 'something bad is gonna happen to you' stuff is over."

"Oh, it's not over. *You* are in danger. You. I can't see it clearly, but I know you're at risk."

"Jeffy..."

"Don't question me, Mark. I knew Joey was in danger, didn't I? I was right and believe me, I didn't want to be. I even knew when Bella had been hurt."

"Yes, you did, but what about Kimmie? You've been saying she's in danger of drowning for years now, but she's never had anything happen to her."

"I don't know what that's all about. I just know what I saw and have seen again in dreams. It's coming. And you don't know how hard it is to know that."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm not trying to give you a hard time."

"Good. Then don't. You're in danger. Be careful."

He smiled. "Yes, ma'am, I promise."

She smiled back. "Thank you. Now, as I was saying, you and Bella are not gonna be charged, so stop being sad or worried." She turned back to Joey. "And you're gonna be fine too."

"Awesome to know that," he said quickly.

"Well, I have to go." She turned, pointed at Mark. "You don't keep Joey up all night. He needs his rest and you need to rest too. You're totally drained."

He nodded. "Yes, I am."

She leaned down and kissed Joey, hugged and kissed Mark and started out, but turned just before she left. "Oh, and aren't you just too excited about fighting in the Kino challenge? I know I am!" She giggled and waved her fingers. "Byee."

Mark watched her go. She was such an anomaly. Going from stern doctor giving orders, to little sister excited like a kid on Christmas morning. And beautiful. So very beautiful. He realized he thought of her as an angel. Who knows, maybe that's exactly what she was. An earth angel. She certainly wasn't a normal human being.

"Well," Mark said, offering his hand to Joey. "Oddly, I feel better having talked with you and having been reassured by our little sister."

"Oddly, I do too," Joey said with his goofy grin in place.

Mark sighed heavily. "I am so tired and I have to be at Judge Hovan's chambers early in the morning."

"Yeah, I guess you still need to take care of that loose end."

"Right. I don't want anyone trying to keep Logan away from Bella for any reason and also, Judge Latham needs to be made to take responsibility for his actions."

"Really," Joey said with a sigh. "Who knows what may or may not have happened had Gordon not gotten custody and convinced Bella to move back in."

"Who knows?" Mark agreed with a weary sigh.

"Get some rest, bro. You have to start training soon."

Mark nodded. "I have to warn you, Joey, my heart is not in it."

"It will be. Now go."

Mark drove home, his mind in a million places. Making sure Judge Hovan gives custody to Bella tomorrow, he had court Monday morning for two clients and he had work to do on those cases. How was he

gonna be able to squeeze in training for the challenge? He'd better figure it out or he's gonna get his butt kicked. He hoped JoJo wasn't feeling too uprooted having to stay at his grandparents' house, but he doubted that since they'd raised him for the first few years of his life.

And then, his mind settled on Bella and what she was going through at this moment. She was in physical pain obviously. Emotionally, she had to be a mess. She'd taken a man's life. Just seeing Gordon's covered body had affected him deeply, how must she feel knowing she'd pulled the trigger? Was she relieved? Was she remorseful? Did she know they could be looking at her for murder and was she afraid?

Mark shook his head to clear it when he realized he'd turned the car around and was now heading toward Breez's house. He shouldn't go, he knew. Wait until Jason had the situation in hand, but he had to see her. Had to let her know she wasn't alone.

Before he knew it he was pulling up the large circular drive. He parked in front and headed up the steps. Lights were on and Mark figured Breez was awake.

He knocked softly.

Breez opened the door, smiled. "There you are. I just finished telling Bella that I was sure you would get here when you could."

Mark smiled sheepishly. "I probably shouldn't be here at all."

She pulled him in. "Yes, you should. Joey's in the hospital and I need someone here. Logan was sick and cried himself to sleep. Mr. Lee dropped Bella off about thirty minutes ago and she's all weepy. All she talks about is you. She says you seemed so distant. She thinks you think less of her because she shot Gordon."

Mark shook his head.

Breez pointed toward the west wing of her giant home. "She's back in the den. Go to her."

Mark didn't even hesitate.

He found her curled up on the sofa, a velvet throw wrapped around her shoulders. She sat up when he entered the room.

"Mark?"

He smiled, came to her, sat down on the sofa and pulled her into his lap. "Yes, Bella. I'm here now, baby. Everything is gonna be okay."

She buried her face against his chest. "Are you ashamed of me?"

"For what? For doing what it took to save your own life? I'm

grateful to you. And I'm grateful to Breez that the gun was there, otherwise, I believe you'd be dead. And I couldn't handle that."

He held her close while she cried. He didn't try to quiet her. He let her get it all out. When she quieted, she looked up at him and he had a chance to look closely at her injuries. Her face was swollen again, especially her lip. She had a black eye. He pulled the blanket away to examine the bruises on her throat, even pulled the t-shirt she now wore away from her body so he could see if he really had seen claw marks on her chest. He had.

"What did the doctors at the hospital have to say?"

She shrugged. "They said I have a concussion. They did a rape kit. They took lots of pictures. My whole body is one big bruise."

He ran a hand over her silky black hair. It was down for a change, hanging loose around her shoulders, covering her face whenever she bent her head.

She looked up at him. "Justin and Lori were so nice to me."

He smiled. "Of course they were."

"Lori is a nurse."

"I know. She's a sweetheart. Our whole family was very happy when she and Justin married."

Bella nodded. "I really like your family."

"They really like you."

"Logan is having a hard time."

"That doesn't surprise me. I think you and he both should speak to Eric. He's a psychologist. Not practicing, but still, you should speak to him. He can recommend a counselor or therapist for you and Logan to go to. It can help. What you've been through lately and what you've been through over the years, it's been quite a trauma. You're gonna need to sort out feelings and emotions."

She looked up at him, nodded. Her big blue eyes seemed to blink in slow motion. "Mark?"

He touched her cheek gently with his finger. "Yes?"

"Do you—still love me?"

"Oh, baby," he said as he pulled her close and wrapped his arms gently around her. "Of course I do. That's why I'm here. I couldn't stand being away from you. I had to see you. I love you, Bella. So much. I love you and I want you. I want you and Logan to be a part of

my life. I don't want to hurry you in any way, but I dream of the day that we're a family. You and me, JoJo and Logan."

She sighed. "That's like, a fantasy that I have."

"It will be reality one day, but first things first. There's a lot of business to take care of."

"Like what?"

"For example, does Gordon have family?"

"Oh, um, yes, he has a sister back east. His father is dead. His mother is alive, but they haven't spoken in years. Gordon hates her. Or, I mean— he did hate her."

"Okay, well, his family needs to be notified of his death. And I'm not sure, but I don't think it's appropriate for you to make his funeral arrangements, I mean, considering the circumstances."

"Oh, yeah, I hadn't thought about funeral arrangements."

"So, we need to see if he had an attorney, a will, a trustee, all those types of things. We need to take care of getting someone to make his arrangements. We need to see about yours and Logan's belongings that you might want to keep from the house. Whose name is the house in?"

"The house? Oh, uh, it's in both of our names. My father helped Gordon and me to get the house."

Mark nodded. "Good. Now, I realize you won't want to live there after what's happened, but the house will have to be sold. Any outstanding debts will have to be paid. There's a lot of red tape that will have to be waded through, but don't worry," he said when he saw her frowning. "Gordon's attorney and I, or uh, Justin, will work through it."

"Why Justin? Why not you?"

He sighed. "Well, sweetie, right now, the police are on the verge of thinking that you and I planned Gordon's demise."

"What? How could they think that?"

"Don't be upset. It's just formality I think. Covering all the bases. We have video and audio of what was talked about in that home for weeks. All of it will point to our innocence."

"Oh no, what will happen to Logan and JoJo?"

"Uh, Logan and JoJo are gonna live with us, happily ever after, that's what. Maybe I shouldn't have told you."

"Of course you should have. I'm a real person, Mark, with the right to be privy to my own circumstances. Gordon treated me like I

didn't have a brain in my head. Please, don't you start."

"Never. I was simply thinking of protecting you from the worry of the situation, but, I promise you now, you and me, we'll be equal partners in all things. Always. I give you my word, Bella. I'll never keep any secrets from you."

Bella's heart began to beat harder. Secrets? Suddenly she realized that she wasn't sure she could promise the same, because she had a secret. A big one. However, she was bound and determined that nobody will ever, ever, know her secret.

She smiled up at him. It wasn't fair. She knew that, but it was what it was and there was no help for it. "Thank you, Mark," she finally said.

"We'll get through this, Bella. And we'll be a family."

"I can't wait," she whispered. "It feels so good to be here with you, with your arms around me. So warm and secure. I think I could drift right off to sleep."

"Then sleep, sweetheart. I'll be right here."

~~**~~

"I can't bear it," Shelley said softly as she cried against her husband's chest.

Eric stroked her back. "Don't borrow trouble, my love. They haven't been charged with anything. They're just being looked at. Justin and Jason are on top of things. Have you ever known them to let us down?"

She sniffed. "No."

"Okay then. Let's just wait and see what happens."

"How long? How long will we have to wait to know if they intend to charge my baby with accessory to murder?"

"Probably only a few days."

"This is making me crazy. I mean, just the thought of seeing him in handcuffs, or behind bars, oh, Eric."

"Okay now, Shelley girl, now you know your thoughts are powerful things. Instead of visualizing the worst possible outcome, why don't you visualize the best possible outcome? That would be a much better use of your time and energy. Positive thoughts, sweetheart. You know that."

Shelley nodded. "Yes, I know. I'm not sure why it suddenly seems so difficult."

Eric scooted farther down in the bed, pulled her close. "Maybe

because your youngest son is in the hospital recovering from an attempted murder. You've just barely made it past that trauma, and now your oldest son is in jeopardy."

She ran her hand over his chest that even at age sixty-one was ripped with muscle. "I'm not the one being traumatized. My sons are."

"Well, for a parent, your children's traumas are your own, and it's extremely hard to separate them. That's what family is all about."

"Yes," she agreed with a frown. "It is hard to separate it."

"On the other hand, each person is responsible for their own actions, for their own lives and for their own happiness. You, right now, are responsible for how you handle your life's traumas. So, do you focus on the negative, or on the positive?"

"The positive, of course," Shelley said.

"Good." He kissed her softly on the mouth. "Trust God. We'll get through this, sweetheart, I just know it."

"That's good to hear from you. Whenever you say it, I believe it."

~~**~~

Mark made his way downstairs in the gray light of dawn. He and Bella had slept on the sofa in Breez's den. In truth, she'd slept and he'd drifted in and out. Just before sun-up he'd carried her up to bed and tucked her in, promising to keep her informed of the day's happenings, and extracting a promise from her that she would rest and heal.

He intended to sneak out, hurry home, shower and change his rumpled clothing before seeing Judge Hovan, but Logan was already up, eating cereal in the kitchen.

"Hey there," Mark said, coming forward and placing a hand on Logan's head. "How ya doin', son?"

Logan nodded slowly. "I'm okay." He looked around anxiously. "How's mom?"

Mark smiled. "She's okay too."

Logan looked down, spooned up another heap of Cheerios, stuffed his mouth and eyed Master Mark.

"Do you have questions?" Mark asked.

Logan shrugged.

"Cuz I know I'd have questions if I were you."

Logan kept his eyes down.

Mark nodded. "Anyway, sooo, there will be a funeral. And..."

Logan's head jerked up. "Do I have to go?"

Mark eyed the young man. His eyes were wide with what seemed like fear. “Uh, no, Logan, you don’t have to go. Your mom will not be going, and everyone would understand if you don’t want to go.”

He calmed. “I don’t think I want to go.”

“I’ll talk to your mom about that if you’d like me to.”

When Logan didn’t answer, Mark studied him, trying to figure out his state of mind. “I guess you feel pretty upset about what happened?”

Logan shrugged again. “I guess.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Logan shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay, well, if you change your mind, you know you can talk to me about anything. Anything at all.”

Logan didn’t look up, but the loud sniff gave him away.

“Hey, son,” Mark said softly. “It’s gonna be okay. Everything is gonna work out. I know you feel pretty bad right now. I mean, he was still your father and...”

Logan rose abruptly. “And I hate him. I’m glad he’s dead. I’m glad.”

He turned and ran right into Breez as she entered the kitchen.

“Hey, sweetie. It’s okay. Shh, now,” she said, hugging him hard. “It’s okay. You know what? I feel the exact same way. It’s not bad to feel that way. He hurt your mom and he had no intentions of stopping. So, yeah, I’m with you on that.”

She looked up at Mark. “I know you have to get to the courthouse. Go ahead. Me and Logan will be fine. We’ll have a long talk.”

Mark nodded. “Okay.” He came forward and bent and placed a kiss on Breez’s head. “Joey has good taste,” he said.

Breez smiled up at him. “So do you,” she said.

Mark looked down at Logan who’d turned to look up at him. “Listen, I’m proud of you, Logan. You have a fierce love for your mom and you have the protective instincts of a man.” He held out his hand. “I’d be honored to shake your hand.”

Logan blinked up at him. Slowly, he placed his hand in Mark’s.

Mark shook his hand firmly and nodded. “Look after the girls while I’m gone, okay?”

Logan nodded and gave a tentative smile. “Yes, sir.”

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Smiling, Mark stepped out of the courthouse, tilted his face up to the sun and drew a deep breath. He'd almost been late, but almost doesn't count. Judge Hovan acted quickly. He remanded custody to Bella Landow and turned the complaints against Judge Latham over to the Chief Judge for the proper disciplinary action.

With that one small weight off his shoulders, Mark immediately felt like he had a little breathing room. He pulled out his phone, noted that Joey had called, and pushed the buttons to call Bella.

"Hello," she said sleepily.

"Did I wake you?"

"Yes."

"Good. I mean, at least good you were actually sleeping."

"How did it go?"

"Great."

She let out the breath she'd been holding. Up to now, nothing had gone her way. Tears gathered in her eyes, but this time they were tears of joy. "I have custody?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"My absolute pleasure. Now rest. I'll come by to see you this evening, if that's okay with you and Logan."

"It's more than okay."

The moment he ended the conversation he called Joey.

"You okay?" Mark asked the moment Joey answered.

"If you're asking about my health, I'm just fine."

"What's wrong?"

"How do you know something's wrong?"

"Just gettin' a vibe."

"Maybe being psychic runs in the family," Joey replied.

"Maybe. What's wrong?"

"A Detective Mooney and Detective Ramos came to visit me this morning bright and early."

"What did they ask?"

"What we expected. What was your relationship with Bella Landow. How long have you known her. What was my relationship to the Landow family. How did I end up being the one to pull Gordon off Bella a few weeks ago."

"They damn well know how all that went down," Mark grumbled.

"Right, but they want to hear if I give the same story twice. Look, so I was thinking, they came to me first thing this morning. They're probably gonna be speaking with the rest of the family soon and well, you know, we didn't exactly have a conversation with the family about this. I mean, we all need to stick to the same story."

Mark sighed. "I don't want anyone to have to lie. They all know how I know Bella. They all know that I realized she was being abused and that you had been hired to investigate and protect."

"*And* they all know that you have feelings for her," Joey put in.

"Yes, and I'm not gonna lie about that. I'm gonna be completely truthful because I have nothing to hide."

"You're gonna tell them that you and Bella spent a night together? Because no matter how innocent, it's not gonna look good."

"If it comes up as a direct question, I guess I'll have to."

"Oh, it's gonna be one of the first questions they ask."

"Then, so be it," Mark said. "Justin says they're gonna find out one way or the other and if I try to hide it, it will be incriminating. I trust Justin and I trust God."

"Okay, good. That sounds like a good plan. Still, I think I'm gonna make some calls and make sure we're all on the same page."

"If you feel you need to, go ahead, little bro."

"Think I'll start with Breez. I just got off the phone with her. I'll call her back, tell her to make sure she and Bella stick to the truth and don't try to hide anything, not even yours and Bella's feelings for each other."

Mark sighed wearily. "Okay, and if you hear anything from Jason, please let me know."

"Will do."

He ended the call, but Mark didn't get the cell phone in his pocket before it rang again. "Hey Rick. What's up?"

"They want me to come in for questioning. Me and Bree and even Eric and Taylor."

Mark sighed. "Sorry about this, Rick."

"Forget sorry. Look, bro, I got this rep, you know."

"You mean the 'Ricky Kino never lies' thing?"

"Yeah, that thing."

"I don't see the problem," Mark said.

"No, you don't get what I'm gonna ask. So, Mark, you just say the

word. You tell me what needs to be said and I'll say it. I think it will hold a lot of weight coming from me."

"Ricky, look, I can't tell you how touched I am that you would destroy your reputation for my sake, but it would be a wasted gesture. The truth is gonna come out. I'm in love with Bella and they're gonna know it. She stayed the night at my home, and they're gonna know that. If you tell them otherwise, no one will ever trust you again. No, keep up the good rep, and more importantly, stay true to God."

"Well, just so you know, Mark, I'll do anything for you, brother."

"Apparently."

"Well then, what I *am* gonna start on today is a little PR work."

"How?"

"Oooh, just by taking a walk down the strip."

"Okay, well, I trust you."

"Chin up, bro. We got your back."

"Thanks, Ricky. I never doubted that."

"Uh, hold on, Bree wants to talk to you."

"Okay."

"Mark?"

"Hi sis."

"Don't you worry, okay?"

"Ooo—kay," he said dryly.

"I talked to Jeffy a few minutes ago. They caught her coming out of the hospital at the end of her shift this morning. They took her down to the precinct and questioned her."

Mark sighed heavily. "Man, I hate that. Makes me sick, them coming after my kid sister without warning. Is she okay?"

Bree laughed. "Oh, she had warning, if you catch my drift. She has her own special alarm system. She said it was them that never knew what hit them. She said she answered all their silly little questions and then she lit into them, giving them statistics and law of averages on each question and telling them how much of the taxpayers' money they were wasting. Literally. She gave them a precise dollar amount. She gave them theorems and mathematical probabilities on your actions and Bella's actions and let them know that their actions were, um, I think the word she used was, 'brainless.' She seemed quite amused by the whole thing and told me not to worry. She said they were only going through the motions. They already know there is no proof that you and

Bella planned Gordon's death."

"Well then, I guess I shouldn't be worried at all," Mark quipped.

Bree laughed. "I guess not. She certainly put my mind at ease. Too bad I didn't hear from her thirty minutes ago."

"Why? What happened thirty minutes ago?"

"They called Eric and mom and asked them to come in."

"Man, they didn't waste any time this morning, did they?"

"No, they didn't. I just hate having to take my kids down there, but I'll insist on being present. I don't want Taylor to be scared."

"I'm sorry, Bree."

"Don't you apologize, Mark. You didn't cause this. You sure as heck didn't make Gordon Landow beat and abuse his wife. That had been going on for a long time."

"Yeah, but I did complicate matters. I knew better than to have Bella spend the night. There was just so much to talk about."

"I know, sweetie. I get it."

"I really knew better. Last time I acted without thinking, I ended up being presented with a kid at the age of eighteen."

"So you see, something good came of it. So instead of calling it 'acting without thinking,' let's call it acting instinctively."

Mark gave a soft chuckle. "Okay, we'll call it that. It is true, JoJo is the best thing that ever happened to me, but you know what I'm saying."

"Listen, Mark, you deserve some happiness in your life. So you jumped the gun a little. It's all gonna work out. Just wait and see."

"I have no choice but to do just that. Thanks, Bree."

"Bye, sweetie. I'll let you know how it goes."

Mark ended the call, got to his car, opened the door, got in, and his phone went off again. He pushed a button. "I'll call you right back." Tossing the phone on the passenger seat, he buckled his seat belt, started the car and pulled out of the parking garage. "Call Justin," he said.

Justin picked up a second later. "Morning, Mark. They want you at the station. You *and* JoJo."

Blowing out a breath, he tried to concentrate. "When?"

"Eleven."

"I'll have to go get JoJo from school."

"I told them that."

"Are you coming?" Mark asked.

"Of course."

"They've already hit up the entire family."

"Yes, I just spoke to Eric."

"Do you know if they've called Bella in?"

"They're giving her time to rest. They said they will talk to her and Logan at three this afternoon."

"And what about Breez?" Mark asked.

"She's at one."

"Have you heard from Jason?"

"He's getting all his ducks in a row. He intends to present what he has to them no later than five today."

"Okay, then. So, here we go."

"Yes. Here we go. Keep your chin up."

"Yes, sir. Will do. Thank you for your help."

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"And did you understand the situation going on in the Landow house?" Detective Mooney asked.

JoJo nodded his head. "Yes, sir."

"Tell me the situation."

"Mr. Landow was abusing Ms. Bella."

"What do you mean by abusing?"

"He hit her."

"How do you know that? Did you see him hit her?"

"No, sir. I only know because of like, evidence."

Mark smiled. The detective frowned.

"And what evidence would that be?"

"She had bruises on her arms. She always acted afraid of him, like she was afraid to ask him if she could go to the belt party."

"How did you know she was afraid?"

"I'm a kid, but I'm not stupid. I can tell. Just like you could tell if I was afraid to tell you something."

"And are you afraid?"

"Not even a little bit."

The detective's eyes met Mark's. Mark couldn't contain his pride.

"Whether or not Bella was being abused by her husband is not in question here," Justin said.

Detective Mooney nodded. He'd merely been trying to assess the

kid. His assessment was that young Joseph Adams was like every other member of the Kino/Adams family; confident, somewhat arrogant and on the side of right. He moved on. "So, do you like Mrs. Landow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think your father likes her too?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've already spoken to Mr. Adams about his relationship with Mrs. Landow. He doesn't deny it. I'm gonna allow you to go ahead with this line of questioning because they have nothing to hide. Still, remember, he is just a kid."

JoJo slanted his eyes up at his Uncle Justin. Justin raised his brows right back at him.

"Joseph, how long have your father and Mrs. Landow been having a, uh, a relationship?"

"My dad has known Ms. Bella since they came to the same studio where my dad teaches martial arts."

"So the relationship has been going on for two years?"

"He's known her for two years. I know you're talking about sex. You want to know if they've been having sex or like, goin' out. The answer is 'no.' My dad really likes Ms. Bella. I think he's in love with her. I hope he's in love with her, but that just started."

"What do you mean, 'just?'"

"Just the last few weeks."

"And why now?"

"I don't know."

The detective looked toward Mark.

"A few weeks ago I noticed bruises on Bella's arms. That's when I realized for sure what was happening. Then Joey got assigned to protect her and definitely confirmed the abuse," Mark began.

"Does he usually talk to you about his assignments?"

"Not usually. There is a confidence to be kept, but it's not like an attorney/client privilege kind of thing. He's allowed some tactical maneuvering to get the job done."

"Why did he need you to accomplish his purpose?"

"He knew I knew her and he asked me to talk to her about removing herself from the situation. As Joey put it, 'it's hard to save someone who doesn't want to be saved.' So, I agreed to help and when I talked to her, I began to realize that I had feelings for her. Who

wouldn't? She's sweet and kind and beautiful and yes, knowing what kind of abuse she was taking at home, it brought out the protective instincts in me."

The detective turned back to JoJo. "And you knew your father had feelings for Mrs. Landow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you ever see them doing things like holding hands, kissing?"

"Yes, sir. Not this last weekend but the one before."

"The one that we've already talked about. The one when you went biking and Mrs. Landow spent the night with your father?"

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you spent the night with your uncle."

JoJo blew out an exasperated breath. "I did, but I came home the next day. Me and Logan were out back on the tramp and we saw my dad kiss Ms. Bella. It was the first time. Look, I know you're trying to make it look like my Dad and Ms. Bella planned to kill Mr. Landow, but you can't because, we're all telling the truth. You can't keep going back over and over stuff because my story won't change."

"Did your dad ever coach you, I mean, did he tell you how to answer my questions?"

Mark only rolled his eyes.

JoJo nodded. "Yes, he did."

The detective sat up straight. "What did he say?"

"He told me to tell the truth exactly as I know it. He told me to not try to say or do anything to protect anyone. He said as long as I told the truth everything would work out the way it was supposed to work out."

Detective Mooney's eyes met Mark's and then Justin's. Both men were trying to control their smiles. Mooney had to give it to them. The kid was smart, mature and honest, straightforward and brave. He had to admit he was impressed with the entire family.

He'd already been told by his captain that he wouldn't find anything out of place when it came to the Kino family. They were pillars of the community, of the nation and even of the world. Still, Mooney felt he owed it to the rest of the regular ol' common people out there to treat the Kinos like anyone else and cover all the bases. He'd elected to do just that as quickly as possible in order to close the case.

His interview with the famous Ricky Kino and his equally famous wife, Breanna Adams and their two kids had been just as informative

and entertaining as this one. Maybe more so. He'd been impressed that even though they came across as extremely confident, they didn't look down their noses at him or expect any special treatment. They'd been polite, forthcoming and honest. The kids, like young Joseph here, had not been afraid to voice their opinions and yet did so in a respectful way. Whatever formula the family was using to raise kids, should be bottled and sold.

His interview with Doctor June Flower Kino had also been informative. He smiled as he remembered her indignation at him even considering that her brother's intentions were less than honorable. She'd lit into him and really given him what for. There was no way he could compete with her dazzling intellect, and the interview had been short and sweet. Well, not so sweet.

Detective Mooney nodded at young Joseph. "Your dad is absolutely right. The truth is always the best. I guess that's all the questions I have for now." He stood and offered his hand. "Oh, one more thing—Logan, you and he are friends?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is that all?"

JoJo's eyes darted to his father. He drew a deep breath. "I, uh, well, we're like brothers."

"How are you like brothers?"

"We took a blood oath."

"Like blood brother type thing?"

"Yes, sir." JoJo lifted his hand, turned it palm up.

The detective studied the scar. It was pink and obviously fairly new. "Would you like Logan to be your real brother?"

"Logan and me, we both want my dad and his mom to get married, and then, we would be real brothers."

Detective Mooney raised an eyebrow. "And isn't it convenient then that Mr. Landow is now out of the picture?"

"You're going a little too far," Justin warned before Mark could.

Mooney nodded. "Yes, I agree, that was uncalled for. I was actually just playing a little devil's advocate."

JoJo decided he would answer anyway. "Well, I'm glad Mr. Landow is gone. I'm sorry that he's dead, but I'm glad he's gone. Me and Logan were hoping they would just get a divorce, and Logan told me he thought his mom was gonna get a divorce, but Mr. Landow beat

her up and tried to kill her. She didn't want to kill him, I know, because she's too nice, but she was probably scared and just fired the gun, but I know Ms. Bella wishes she could've just got divorced. Cuz now, she has to remember what it was like to kill someone and that takes a long time to get over."

"And just how do you know that?"

"My grandfather had to kill someone once. He says it took him a long time to get over it. He had to do it because if he didn't, the man was gonna kill my grandmother, so he says it was worth it, but he says life is precious. Even animals and bugs, and, even bad guys."

Mooney knew the story, of course. He nodded at the smart young man. "I'll try to remember that. Thank you for coming in." He offered his hand to Mark.

Mark nodded and shook his hand. Justin and JoJo followed suit. The three turned and left quickly.

Mooney walked out and met with his partner and his captain who'd been listening to the interview.

"Hell of a family," the captain said.

"To say the least."

"Just heard that Mark Adams is gonna take his brother's place in the Kino challenge," his partner said.

"Guess I'll have to get tickets."

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"I don't want to go," Logan said quietly. "Please, Mom, don't make me go. I don't know what to say."

Bella took his hands in hers. "Logan, look at me."

He raised his head and looked at his mom.

"I know this is a hard thing, but I've never known you to shy away from something just because it's hard. Remember, I know you. I know how strong you are. I know more than anyone how strong you can be. I need you to be strong for me one more time."

"But what should I say?"

"You should tell them just the same thing you said to the detective earlier. It's okay. They've already spoken with Mark and his whole family. The police already know what kind of man your father was," she said, her voice cracking at the past tense. "Just tell them your story. They'll probably ask you questions about things your father did in the past. It's okay to tell them. And they'll probably ask you about my

relationship with Mark. It's okay to tell them."

"Is that all? Is that all they'll ask?"

Bella frowned as she thought hard. "Well, they'll probably ask where you were last night. That will be the easiest one to answer since you were at flag football practice."

"Yeah, but what if they ask me something that I don't know the answer to?"

"Then just tell them you don't know."

"What if they ask me if I'm glad he's dead. Because I am."

"That's okay, Logan. I know how you feel. There's been such a weight hanging over your head for so long. Of course you feel relieved to have that weight suddenly gone. I realize the way your father treated me and the way he treated you is all you've ever known."

"No, Mom, it's not all I've ever known. I'm not stupid. I see how other fathers are. I see how Master Mark is with JoJo and how Mr. Kino is with Eric and Taylor. I see how other men treat their wives. My dad wasn't normal. I know that. He's a freak. He was a freak."

Bella sighed, trying hard to understand Logan's mood, to understand his frame of mind. He was troubled, that much was obvious. She decided right then and there that when they got home later today she would give Grandmaster Kino a call and ask him to speak to Logan. She was thinking she'd better do all she could for Logan now, because she might be spending the rest of her time in jail, and if they drug her off to jail, who knows what Logan would do.

As if he could read her mind Logan placed his hand on her shoulder. "I just want you to know, Mom, that I won't let them put you in jail."

Bella frowned. "Nonsense, Logan. No one is going to jail."

✝✝✝

2 Timothy 2:15

"Do your best to present yourself to God
as one approved, a worker who has no need
to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

Chapter Sixteen

By the time Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams finished dinner that Friday night and walked down the street, they'd been photographed hundreds of times and asked hundreds of questions concerning 'Breanna's brothers' trouble.'

By the next morning, the entire nation knew the romantic story of how Mark Adams had tried to rescue one of his students from an abusive marriage and how that student had become a very close friend. They already knew that the week before, Joey Adams had been shot because of his interference in another woman's abusive marriage, and Bree was quick to remind the world of that incident.

Breanna praised her brothers for their strength and courage and for their part in helping women to empower themselves. She spoke of how she was sure they would do it again, even if it meant legal troubles for them, for they would always be champions of the underdog.

Ricky and Bree were pros at working the media, but none of it had been necessary. A few hours earlier Jason had showed up at the precinct with enough video evidence to exonerate Mark and Bella.

Detective Mooney took time to go through video highlights and audio transcripts. The evidence was overwhelmingly in favor of Mark and Bella. Gordon Landow lost it, tried to kill his wife and she protected herself the best she could. If she hadn't, she would most likely be dead. The point was, she believed she'd be dead and that had been easy to see firsthand, considering the bruises on her throat and the contusions on her face. The 911 recordings also clearly showed she was terrified.

The case was labeled self-defense and Bella Landow and Mark Adams were exonerated.

The next day, Mark's day started out like any other Saturday. He taught his martial arts class. Several of the students and several of the students' parents had questions and Mark did his best to give answers. He hated that he felt the need to defend himself. He didn't really care

what the others thought of him, but in the role of instructor, he represented a Kino studio and the Kino name and reputation and therefore felt responsible to do what he could in the PR department.

He'd finally called the class to order but only a few moments later the door opened. The class began to murmur excitedly, and Mark turned to see who'd come in late. A wide smile appeared on his face. Joey walked in and headed toward him at the front of the class. Ricky was just a step behind.

Mark reached out, grasped his hand. "Joey?"

Joey smiled. "They let me out a day early. I promised them I would go straight home and get some rest."

"And?"

"And I had to make one stop."

"Here?"

"Yes."

Mark looked past him to Ricky, gave his stepbrother a slight bow. "Ricky, I take it you're the chauffeur?"

"Good guess, but I had the same reason as Joey for stopping by."

The class was filled with thirty-some-odd students, both kids and adults, and they had become uncharacteristically noisy. "Quiet," Mark said sharply. "Courtesy please, and attention."

The students immediately stood at attention.

"Class, we have the honor of visitors. Please show your respect. Presenting Grandmaster Kino and Master Adams."

The class bowed deeply. Joey and Ricky returned the respect.

"So, to what do we owe this unexpected pleasure?" Mark asked.

Ricky turned toward the class. "I have great news," he began. "Your instructor probably has not filled you in yet and so Joey and I came to do it in person. As you probably know, Master Adams was gunned down a few weeks ago. Because of that, he is unable to participate in the Kino Challenge this year, and your teacher, Master Mark, has very graciously accepted the invitation to fight in his brother's stead and represent the Kino family at the Challenge.

The burst of applause and cheers took Mark by surprise. He looked to Joey and Ricky who were smiling broadly. They knew he wasn't thrilled about fighting in the challenge. They wanted to make sure he wasn't gonna back out. His eyes met theirs. "Well done," he murmured.

Joey grinned. Ricky shrugged. "We gotta do what we gotta do. It's more for your sake than for anything else."

"Right."

Ricky went on. "In addition, some of your Saturday classes over the next few weeks may be taken up with helping Master Mark to train."

Again, applause and cheers.

Ricky turned to Mark. "Well then, Master Adams, we'll let you get back to it. Have an awesome day."

He and Joey bowed again to the class. The class reciprocated and watched as two of their heroes exited the building.

"Master Mark, seriously, kick some butt," one of the older black belts said.

Mark sighed, nodded. "I seriously intend to. Okay. Let's begin."

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He was glad when class was over. He was expected to head straight to his Mom's and Eric's house for lunch before he began training, which he was all too happy to do since Bella and Logan were there right now, speaking with Eric.

The sky was gray and a slight drizzle began as Mark and JoJo locked up the studio and headed out to the car. As he started the car and glanced over at JoJo in the passenger seat, he realized his son had been particularly quiet.

"You okay, JoJo?"

JoJo looked at his dad, then shrugged.

"Wanna talk about it?"

JoJo shrugged again.

Mark frowned. "Ya know, talking usually helps."

"Why didn't you tell me about the challenge?" JoJo blurted out.

Mark did his best to hide the sigh of exhaustion. "I'm sorry, son. Joey just asked me Thursday night at the hospital. You were out with Justin. Then we got the call from Bella and all hell broke loose. To be honest, I hadn't even thought about it since then. I had no idea Joey and Rick were gonna show up today. Believe me, it wasn't on purpose."

JoJo nodded. "Okay. I guess I should've known that, huh?"

"I think we all might be a little on edge lately and I haven't had a chance to talk to you much. So, how about letting me make up for that now. How you doin', son?"

JoJo looked over at his father while he drove. His father was a man that everyone respected and loved, especially JoJo himself.

"JoJo?" Mark said again. "Whatever you have to say, you can say it. Tell me you know that."

JoJo nodded. He bit his lip to keep it from trembling. "I was pretty worried, you know, Dad? I mean, after I talked to the detective, nobody else talked to me about it. I heard what everyone was saying, but I was really worried that you might go to jail for helping to kill Mr. Landow."

Blinking hard, Mark shook his head. "Oh, man, Joe, you know, sometimes I think of you as all grown up. You got overlooked in all this mess. I should've taken the time to sit down with you and explain to you everything that was going on."

"You didn't have to explain. I understood what was going on. I'm just saying I was..." He stopped, shrugged. "You know."

Mark nodded. "Scared?"

"I guess."

Mark pulled the car over. Pushed the seat back and turned so he could look at his son. "I'm sorry, JoJo. It's okay that you were afraid cuz I was afraid too."

"Afraid that you wouldn't get to see Ms. Bella anymore?"

"Yes. Afraid of that too, but right now I'm talking about how afraid I was that I'd be separated from you. That you'd have to grow up without me and that I'd have to live without you. Do you understand Joe, that I love you with everything I got in me? You're my son and I can't even describe how much I love you. No matter what happens, please always know, that you and me..." He stopped and held up his first two fingers showing no space in between.

JoJo smiled. Held up his fingers. "You and me, Dad."

"I'm sorry you got shoved aside in all this. I guess I assumed Mom and Eric would take care of it."

"They talked to me before I went to school yesterday. They told me not to worry. But..."

"But you wanted to talk to me."

He nodded.

"Sometimes, being a single parent, it gets easy to let Mom and Eric step in and do what I should be doing. I'm so used to you going home with them and spending the night whenever something comes up, I haven't really thought to ask how you feel about it. I'm sorry, JoJo."

"It's okay. I mean, I don't have a problem going to Grandma's house. I like going there. It's just that, this time, well, I got scared."

"Yeah, I guess it's the first time we've come across something this serious where we had our actual way of life threatened."

"Yeah."

Mark held out his hand. "Are we good now?"

JoJo clasped his father's hand. "Yeah, we're good."

Smiling, Mark tugged on the hand and pulled JoJo into a bear hug, ending with rubbing his knuckles over his son's golden brown hair. "I love you, son."

"I love you too, Dad."

Mark released him, adjusted his seat and pulled back onto the road.

They drove in silence a few minutes. Finally Mark asked, "So, how do you feel about Logan?"

"Logan's my brother."

"Yeah, so I've seen, but you know, if Ms. Bella and me were to get together and we actually became a family, then, you'd have to share me with Logan."

"So?"

Mark smiled. "I'm just trying to say that I'd probably have to go out of my way to make sure Logan knew he was cared for."

JoJo frowned. "You wouldn't love him too?"

Mark smiled. "Yes, that's what I meant. I'm just trying to ask how you feel about that."

"I *want* you to love him too, Dad. His own father didn't even love him and that really sucks."

"Yeah, it does. So you won't mind sharing me?"

"Naw. You and me, it's always gonna be special, ya know? But I want you to try to treat Logan as good as you do me."

Mark smiled. "Okay then, I'll try."

"So, are you and Ms. Bella gonna get married?"

"We need to give her some time, but I hope that's what happens."

"How much time do we need to give her?"

"Well, JoJo, there's not a set amount of time. It could be a few weeks to several months."

JoJo frowned, sighed. "Okay. But I hope it's not that long."

"Yeah. Me too."

They pulled up to what others called the Kino estate, Mark and

JoJo simply called it home. Several cars were parked around the circular drive including Joey's Ferrari, Ricky's Bentley and Bella Landow's BMW.

Knowing he was about to see Bella, Mark found his heart beating faster as he and JoJo ran up the front steps and hurried inside. It being wet and cool outside, Mark expected to find everyone in the great room chatting or in the kitchen munching but the house was fairly quiet.

Mark poked his head in the kitchen and found his mom at the stove stirring a huge pot of homemade potato soup as she chatted with Bree. Taylor sat at the kitchen table drawing pictures in a sketchbook.

"Hey, Mom. Hey, Bree. Hey, Taylor."

Shelley smiled with pleasure, stopped stirring, moved forward and embraced her son. "Oh, Mark, I can't tell you how much I've wanted to simply hug you over the past few days."

Mark hugged her. "I guess it's been hard on everyone. I'm really sorry to put you all through that."

Shelley waved his apology away as she grabbed JoJo's face and kissed both his cheeks. "Hello, my favorite grandson," she whispered.

JoJo grinned. He didn't think anything special about what she'd said because she always whispered the same thing to Eric and Taylor too. "Hey, Grandma. Where's Eric?"

"They're all downstairs putting Jeffy through the mill."

"All?" Mark asked.

"No. Bella and Logan are with Eric in the study, but they've been in there for at least an hour now. I don't expect them to be much longer."

Mark nodded. He was anxious to spend some time with her. Last night she and Logan had been so tired, he'd merely hugged them both and tucked them in.

He ached to see her, ached to hold her. Pushing that need aside, he and JoJo headed downstairs.

They heard laughter and cheering. They opened the door to the weight room to find Jeffy on the bench and Ricky helping her replace the bar in the cradle. Mark eyed the bar. One-eighty-five. Not bad.

"There's the man," Joey exclaimed from where he lounged on the incline bench.

Mark forced a smile. He was so very tired. The strain of the past few weeks had taken its toll on him. Still, if the one who'd been shot

was down here urging him on, how could he say 'no'?

"Mind if I take time to eat some lunch and rest for a few minutes?" Mark said dryly.

"Not at all," Ricky chirped. "Since right now we're taking Jeffy through a max out to see where she's at. So that gives you about ninety minutes before it's your turn. After that, while Dad works with Jeffy, you'll max out."

"Mark and I maxed the other day and I can already tell you where he's at," Joey said.

"Where's that?"

"He's at– strong as hell."

Eric and JoJo laughed.

"Okay, Jeffy," Ricky said. "Good job on that. Let's move to squats."

She complied quickly. Normally, Jeffy would be talking a mile a minute and Mark wondered if she was having some reservations.

"You okay, Jeffy?" he asked.

She smiled as she watched Ricky load weights. "I'm fine, why?"

"You're just so quiet."

She looked around to find everyone watching and listening before she looked back at Mark. "It's just so awesome, you know, to get to do something else I'm good at, something other than using my brain. I intend to give this opportunity to be the first woman to fight in the challenge everything I've got. I owe it to women to represent."

"Okay, represent women," Ricky said. "But represent the family too. Now turn around and get set."

"Oh, you mean you want me to win?" Jeffy said with a giggle.

"Uh, yeah, I do. I really do," Ricky said.

"Hah," she said indignantly, glancing at Mark. "I'm not the one you need to worry about."

Mark's eyes met Joey's. He shrugged. "She's probably right."

Taylor came bounding down the steps. "Hey everyone," she called. "Grandma says lunch is ready."

Eric and JoJo headed up quickly with Taylor right behind. Jeffy went ahead and tried the squat Ricky had loaded, easily lifting the two hundred and five pounds. He helped her replace the bar.

"We'll finish later," he said. "Let's eat. Come on, I'll race you."

They took off.

Mark waited for Joey, watching him as he gingerly lifted himself off the incline bench and moved slowly toward the door.

"Are you still in pain?" Mark asked.

"A little, but I don't mind. I'm moving a little slow right now, but I'll improve every day."

"It's only been ten days since the shooting. I think you may be pushing it a little. I want you to get more rest."

Joey nodded. "I will. I promise. After lunch, Breez is taking me to my loft." He grinned. "She wants to take care of me."

Mark snorted. "I'll tell you what Ricky said to me last week, you're playing with fire."

Joey laughed. "Don't I know it. But just between you and me bro, I'm not capable of feeding that spark right now."

"Wow, Joe, you really are feeling puny. It's unsettling."

Joey laughed. "Lighten up, Mark. By the grace of God, I'm alive, and by His grace I'll be back better than ever."

Mark sighed and nodded at his brother's command, given in Korean, to be patient.

Mark let Joey precede him up the stairs, placing his hand on the small of Joey's back to give him a little extra help. The minute they made it to the large dining room Mark searched for Bella. His eyes came to rest on Logan who was standing silently between young Eric and JoJo.

"Dad," young Eric said. "Me, JoJo and Logan are gonna eat in the kitchen, okay?"

Ricky shook his head. "Logan, JoJo and I, and, no, you're gonna sit in the dining room with everyone else. This is a family gathering."

"But there's not enough room."

"There's plenty of room," Bree argued. "What are you talking about? This table seats twenty-four and there's only thirteen people and there are thirteen places set."

Breez approached and hooked her arm through Joey's. She frowned. "Joey, you okay?"

Joey frowned back. "Yes, Breez, I'm okay. Really, now, stop babying me. I'm fine."

Shrugging, Breez turned and smiled at Mark. "She went upstairs to one of the guest rooms to freshen up."

"Thanks, Breez," he said quietly. He noticed his mom and Eric

standing close, talking quietly about something unpleasant, if he could judge by the frown on his mother's face. They finished their conversation and called the group to order to pray and give thanks.

After the heartfelt ritual, Shelley looked up with a smile. "Everyone line up and fill your bowls from the buffet. There's sour cream, cheese, bacon pieces and chives to use as garnish. The sandwiches are already on the table."

There was a giant scramble to line up at the buffet. Mark would've smiled at JoJo who'd made it first, but he was too concerned about Bella. He fought with himself. His head told him to leave her alone, give her some space. His heart said to go up and check on her. His heart won.

He turned and trotted up the front stairs. He didn't know which room she was in and ended up opening three doors before he found her. It just so happened that she was in his old bedroom and he wondered if that was because she was instinctively drawn to him. He liked to think that, anyway.

When he opened the door he couldn't see her, but he heard the water running in the bathroom. He moved forward and knocked on the bathroom door.

"Yes?" came her reply, her voice shaky at best.

"Bella, it's me."

After several seconds of silence, Mark became worried. "Bella?"

"Yes, come in."

He opened the door. She stood in front of the vanity, staring at her reflection. Mark moved up behind her, placed his hands gently on her shoulders, looked at her in the mirror. "Are you okay?"

She glanced away from her own face, looked into his eyes. "It's like, I don't know who I am. I'm looking at this person in the mirror, and I don't know her."

"Maybe when the bruises go away, you'll feel..."

"No, it's not the bruises." She shook her head. "It's this emptiness. This numbness. I don't feel anything. How can I not feel anything?"

"It's the trauma of what you've been through over the past few weeks. You're suffering from PTSD."

She gave a soft laugh. "It's not like I've been to war."

"Uh, it's exactly like that."

She frowned and looked down. "I'm worried about Logan."

He smiled at those words. “So then, that means you’re not completely numb. And don’t worry. Logan will get through this.”

She looked up at him. “But...”

“But what?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, I guess. I don’t know what my problem is. I wanted to be out of Gordon’s reach, and now I am. I wanted to be free to have a real life and now I am. The only problem is, now that I am, I feel– lost. Yes, that’s it. Lost.”

He turned her around, placed a finger under her chin and tilted her face up. “Then I’ll help you find yourself. You’re not alone, Bella. And neither is Logan. I’m here for both of you, and so is Breez and Joey and every single person in my family. This ‘thing’ you’re going through, it’s one of the phases. It will pass. And then there will be another phase, like anger or some other emotion. Eventually, you will feel yourself again.”

“And that brings me right back to the first question. Who am I?”

“Oh, Bella, you are only the most amazing woman ever. You’re a loving, kind woman. Unselfish. Compassionate. Strong. Oh, so strong. Intelligent. Beautiful. Sweet. I could go on and on.”

She shook her head and leaned her forehead against his chest. “What if I’m not?”

“You are. If you’re talking about shooting Gordon, you have to know it was something you had to do. It’s not wrong to try to survive. If you hadn’t pulled that trigger, I would be standing by your grave right now, filled with self-loathing because I wasn’t there to save you. And Logan, think of him. If you hadn’t acted, Logan would be all alone without you.”

She didn’t answer. Mark wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in tight against his body. “I’m still in love with you, Bella. Do you hear me? I love you.”

She looked up at his face as a tear ran down her cheek, offered him a slight smile.

He leaned down, kissed her forehead, each cheek and then softly placed a kiss on her swollen mouth. Smoothing her hair out of her face, he looked into her eyes, trying to convey all the love he felt. “How did your talk with Eric go? Was it not helpful at all?”

“It was fine. I mean, he said a lot of the same things you just said, you know, about the stages of post-traumatic stress. I like talking to

him. He's so, what? Calm, I guess. He makes me feel calm too."

"Yeah, he has that knack."

"He recommended a therapist for both me and Logan to see, but I asked him if we could just talk to him for now, if he had time. He said that would be fine on one condition."

"What was the condition?"

"That we see him at least three times a week for the first three weeks and then at least twice a week after that."

"Did you agree?"

"Yes. For now anyway."

They heard footsteps in the hall outside the room and turned.

"Dad," JoJo said. "Granddad says 'you both need some nourishment,'" JoJo mocked. "And that you are to come join the family for lunch right away."

Mark smiled. "Thanks, JoJo."

JoJo nodded, looked past his father to the lady he hoped would one day accept him as her son. "Hey, Ms. Bella."

She smiled. "Hi, JoJo."

He started to turn away but stopped. "I, uh, I'm glad you and Logan are all right."

Her lips trembled. "Thank you so much, sweetie. Now that you've said that, I feel better already."

JoJo smiled and ran ahead. Mark and Bella followed.

They arrived in the dining room amidst a cacophony of conversation, laughter, utensils clinking, ice in the glasses tinkling. Eric had moved a chair up to Shelley's side of the table and he and Shelley sat together at one end. Two empty seats sat to their left. Mark and Bella grabbed their soup and sat in the empty chairs.

Bella immediately caught Logan's eye and smiled at him. The worry on his face seemed to disappear as he smiled back. She couldn't help but see that young Eric and JoJo had every intention of sticking closely to him. She was grateful for their easy friendship.

Mark nodded at his mother and Eric and offered a quick smile. Shelley smiled back. Eric's tight mouth proclaimed that there is a problem and he'd talk to Mark about it later.

Bella complimented Shelley on the soup and forced herself to eat every bite. She picked at a sandwich but it was difficult to eat with her swollen mouth.

The table conversation pretty much centered around the Kino challenge. The entire family seemed to be intensely excited about it. Everyone, Bella noticed, but Mark. She would've thought Mark would be glad to get to fight in the challenge, but he seemed disinterested.

Shelley smiled at Bella. "Eric says you're gonna be having some sessions with him several times a week."

Bella nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I hope that's okay. I don't want to inconvenience you."

"Nonsense. What I was gonna say is, since you're sort of in between places, maybe you and Logan could stay here for a few weeks."

"That would be wonderful!" Breez said quickly. "Then I won't feel so bad leaving you all alone at my house, because I'm gonna be staying with Joey for a while."

"Oh," Bella said softly. "I hadn't really thought about the fact that Logan and I are basically homeless. I mean, we have a house, but we don't really want to stay there."

"Of course not," Shelley said.

Bella frowned. "I guess I need to go back there and start the process of selling."

"Justin and I will take care of that, Bella," Mark put in. "Justin is looking into Gordon's affairs, you know, his will, his debts, etcetera. He will meet with you as soon as he knows something."

"Oh," Bella said again, clearly at a loss.

"I'm sure it seems a little overwhelming," Shelley said softly. "But we're all here for you. We'll help you through it."

Bella's eyes traveled around to each face at the table. Every single one of them seemed kind and compassionate and so willing to help her, a complete stranger.

"So, say you'll stay with us for a while," Shelley urged. "I promise to give you all the space and privacy you need, and Eric and I will be right here for you, in case you need someone. It's a difficult time for you, Bella, let me be there for you."

Tears welled in Bella's eyes and she nodded.

"Oh wonderful," Shelley said. She glanced up at her husband, gave him a quick smile.

Eric smiled at Shelley. She'd told him she would have no problem getting Bella and Logan to stay. He was glad she'd been right.

"Oh, this is great," Jeffy exclaimed. "There's gonna be a houseful. Especially since I'm gonna be home most of the time."

"Why is that?" Eric asked.

"Because I'm taking a few weeks off from the hospital so that I can train properly for the challenge."

Eric smiled. "Now, that's the spirit." He glanced at Mark. "Think you can swing the same?"

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

"I'm sure Justin would help you to clear your schedule," Ricky offered, a sly smile on his face.

"Of course he would," Joey agreed.

Ricky nodded proudly at Joey.

"That would be cool, Dad," JoJo put in. "And since you'd be training all the time and stuff, we might as well stay here too."

"Oh, yes," Shelley exclaimed. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to have everyone home under one roof?"

"Us too?" young Eric asked excitedly, turning toward his father.

"Sorry, kiddo," Ricky said. "There's a point when things turn from order to chaos."

"Aww-uuhh," Eric drawled.

"But maybe we'll stay the weekends," Ricky offered.

Eric's eyes lit up. "Cool."

"So, Dad," JoJo said. "Can we stay too?"

Mark smiled at his son. "Maybe." He had to admit, the thought of staying in the same house with Bella, having access to her 24/7, it was pretty enticing. "I, uh, I have to speak with Justin, see what can be done."

"But we're staying tonight anyway, right?" JoJo asked.

"Yes, tonight." He glanced down at Bella when he felt her hand on his thigh. Reaching down he covered her hand with his, squeezed it. His heart soared.

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Mark lay on his back, covered in perspiration, his breath coming in huge gulps. Over the years, Ricky had put him down hundreds of times. Still, this time Mark had expected to hold his own a little better. After all, Rick wasn't getting any younger.

Ricky extended his hand. Mark grasped it and let him pull him up.

"Don't feel too bad," Ricky said with a grin. "I train a lot more

than you. If you put a law book in front of me, I wouldn't know the front from the back."

"Don't make excuses for him," Eric said sternly.

Ricky's face immediately sobered. He bowed to his father respectfully. "Yes, sir."

Heaving a giant sigh, Mark glanced around at his audience. The whole family had come down to the beach before dinner to see the impromptu match. It was cool and the air still damp with the rain that had fallen most of the day, but that didn't deter anyone, not even Bella. Everyone now waited for Grandmaster Kino to speak.

Eric frowned. He'd wanted to get an idea of where Mark was at in his fighting skills. It'd been some time since he'd actually seen him in action. Mark held his own for a time, but his stamina was gone. Once he'd begun to tire, Ricky had easily gotten past his defenses. Eric shook his head. "Well now, we have a lot of work to do. I'm guessing you haven't been consistent with your cardio training and that will probably be our biggest hill to climb. Your skills are rusty but good. Your speed is suffering, but that will come back with the cardio training."

Mark nodded as he caught his breath. "Yes, sir."

Eric watched his face. "And son, I'd like to speak to you privately after dinner, if you don't mind."

"Yes, sir. Of course I don't mind. I'm grateful."

"Good. Now, let's run you through some wind sprints. Jeffy, Rick, you may join us."

"Can we?" young Eric asked.

"Yes, you *may,* but don't get in the way." Eric raised his eyebrows at his wife. "Shelley?"

She frowned. "Oh, I guess I need to set a good example, huh?"

"The question is not do you need to, it's do you want to?"

"Yes, I guess I do." She smiled at Bree, Breez and Bella. "Well, ladies, looks like dinner is up to you three."

"I think we can handle it," Bree said.

The women and Joey watched as the majority of the family spread out across the beach. On Eric's signal, they all took off running at full speed. Taylor lagged behind but didn't give up. They reached a marker placed forty yards down the beach and slowed to a walk, before they finally stopped. They then turned, lined up again and waited for Eric's signal. When he finally gave it, they took off once again, coming back

toward the starting line.

"How long will they do this?" Breez asked.

Joey shrugged. "They'll run until they drop or throw up or both."

"Is all this really necessary?" Breez asked.

"If Mark and Jeffy want to win it is. I know Jeffy wants to win."

"What about Mark?" Bella asked.

Joey raised his eyebrows. "Good question." His hand rubbed absently over the wound on his chest.

Breez turned toward him and placed her hands on his shoulders. "You wish you were out there also training?"

"Yeah, I guess I do."

She smiled sweetly. "But you've had the spotlight for several years now. It won't hurt to give your brother a little of that."

"No, it won't hurt me at all and Mark deserves a little acclaim. I just hope he gets it."

"What do you mean?" Bella asked.

"Well, I mean, I just hope I haven't talked him into doing something that he doesn't really want to do, because, if he's just doing this for me and not because he wants to, then he probably won't succeed. And if he loses, he'll be the first in the family to do that, and I don't know what that would do to his psyche."

"Surely he realizes you can't win all the time," Breez said.

Joey's eyes grew wide and he shook his head as if he hadn't heard her correctly. "What? What did you just say? I could've sworn you said we can't win all the time."

Breez rolled her eyes. "You are such a dork. Come inside and watch me cook dinner."

Sighing, Joey conceded. It wasn't helping him to watch and wish.

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Mark knocked on the door to the study.

"Come in," Eric called softly.

Mark opened the door. His stepfather smiled kindly at him. Mark smiled back even though he had a feeling he wasn't gonna like the conversation that was about to take place. Mark had a great deal of respect for Eric. Respect and love. They were close. Probably closer than Mark and Joey both were to their own father.

Even though Mark and Joey had a good relationship with their father, Mark wasn't blind. He'd known since he was a kid that his

father had been unkind and harsh with his mother and that he'd caused her a great deal of heartache. He'd learned when he was a teenager, that his mother had been raped and his father had been less than sympathetic. His father was a little egocentric, easily irritated, easily frustrated and quick-tempered. Mark understood that people were human and that people could change. His father had seemed to, somewhat, because he treated his new wife with kindness and respect.

In contrast, Eric was an entirely different caliber. He was all about serving others. He was strong, physically and mentally, kind, nonjudgmental, understanding, powerful, insightful and very calm. Still waters run deep. He sought perfection in every area of life; physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. He wanted nothing more than to help others and in this case, Mark knew Eric wanted to help him.

Because Eric was also Grandmaster Kino, Mark and Joey had walked a line between the easy love and friendship they had with their stepfather and the respect one shows to their martial arts master. It merely depended on which mode they were in. At this moment he was in father/son mode and so Mark merely took the seat in front of Eric's desk and waited.

"So, Mark, I thought it only right to share with you some of my concerns," Eric began.

"Concerns, sir? About what in particular?"

"About a few things, but mostly about Bella and Logan."

Mark frowned. "So, does that mean that you are about to break a doctor/patient confidentiality?"

Eric smiled. "Yes and no. I explained to Bella that I am not a practicing therapist and I asked her if it would be okay for me to discuss some of my concerns with you or Shelley or with one of my colleagues."

"And she actually agreed?"

"She did, which speaks volumes in itself."

Mark nodded. "Okay, then, what are the concerns other than the obvious PTSD?"

"It's hard to tell, and I think that's because neither Bella nor Logan are being entirely up front. Oh, they're upset and understandably so. Still, I keep getting the feeling that they're hiding something."

"You mean like the fact that they're probably happy that Gordon's

dead? They wouldn't want to tell people that. It would make them seem cruel and harsh. They would want to appear contrite and sorry when all they feel is relief. Living a lie is difficult."

"Exactly. I'm gonna want them to come clean at least with me. Until they do, they will relive the horror of what happened over and over. They won't be able to feel much joy."

"What do you mean?"

"Things that would normally make a person feel happy or excited will be muted."

"Well, she did already tell me that she felt numb."

Eric nodded. "Yes, she told me that too. Hopefully, I'll be able to guide her and Logan through and help them to recognize, put things in order and understand what they're feeling, or, not feeling. Eventually they will recover, but because they're reluctant to fully open up, it may take some time."

Mark nodded thoughtfully. "So, are you telling me to back off?"

"No, not at all. You represent stability to them. What I'd like you to do is encourage them to talk about what happened as much as possible. The more they talk about it, the better it will be for them. It's not to become a hush-hush subject that everyone is afraid to bring up."

"Okay, I can certainly do that."

"Especially if you stay here. JoJo is good for Logan."

"Ah, well, yes, I can stay here. It will be a little inconvenient trying to get JoJo to school and me to work, but it can be done."

"It can be done easily if you get Justin to help you clear your cases so that you can train properly for the challenge."

"I see," Mark mumbled. "I guess that is the other concern you had to discuss with me?"

"Yes. So, to put it honestly, son, if you don't truly want to fight in the challenge, then I don't want you to. I feel some hesitation on your part. There can't be. You've always been competitive and so this surprises me a bit, yet I know you have some other distractions going on in your life right now."

Mark didn't answer. He took a few moments to listen to his own thoughts, his own heart. The Kino Challenge was a great opportunity. If he were to back out, he'd probably regret it later. Yet Eric was right in that it doesn't feel like his heart is in it, but also, there was always that little niggling thought that he wasn't as good as his younger

brother.

While Joey had pursued the tournament circuit, following in Ricky's footsteps, Mark had pursued football which was why he was a lower rank than his brother. Football had fallen through when Mark had injured his knee. Now, maybe it was time to put forth some effort and prove to himself he could do it. He looked up at Eric.

"What do you think my chances are?" Mark asked, knowing Eric would tell the hard truth.

Eric shrugged. "Well, as it stands now, you'll probably win the first bout. The next two would be questionable."

"So, I would fail."

"I don't call losing a bout failing. Both Joey and Ricky have lost bouts in a challenge."

"But never more than one."

"True. Remember though, I said, for now. If you put your heart into it, train hard, bring your fitness level up to par, I believe you could win."

Mark nodded his head as he thought. Eric would never say that if he didn't mean it.

"Mark," Eric said softly, interrupting his thoughts. "It's extremely obvious to me that you have other things on your mind, namely, Bella. You're in love with her, I realize. You waited for her and now that you're free to be together, she's unable to give you what you want from her, or what you need."

"I'm giving her space. I know she needs time."

"I know you know. That doesn't keep you from feeling a little, well, a little lovesick, for want of a better phrase."

Mark rolled his eyes.

"And lovesick isn't the best way to face the Kino challenge."

Eric noticed Mark's hand ball into a fist. Mark was frustrated and maybe a little angry that Eric had so easily read him. He decided to pursue the topic. "What are you feeling right now?"

Mark shook his head. "I don't know."

"I say you do. What are you feeling?"

Mark shifted in his chair. "Angry, I guess."

Eric nodded. "Honest answer. Good. Why are you angry?"

"Not really sure, sir."

"Want some help?"

"By all means."

"Angry at Gordon for what he did to Bella and that he still has power even now to cause Bella pain. Angry at Bella for going back to him and placing herself in the danger that led to her firing that gun. Angry at Breez for giving Bella the gun. Angry at Joey for forgetting to pick up that gun when he was supposed to and mostly angry at yourself for failing Bella. Failing to protect her, failing to get her custody and now failing to be able to really communicate with her. You feel afraid that you've lost your connection with her and you wouldn't have lost that connection if not for everything that's happened. So, damn everyone and everything. Damn yourself. Damn the challenge."

Mark stood abruptly, turned, went to the window, and ran a hand through his hair.

"Mark, answer this simple question for me. Would you like to win the Kino Challenge?"

Mark turned. "Yes, of course I would."

"Why?"

He thought hard, trying to be as honest with himself and with Eric as he could be. "It would be nice to make the family proud, to continue the family legacy. It would be nice to see Mom's eyes, and everyone else when I win that last bout." He smiled. "Especially if Jeffy won both of her bouts. It would be nice to dispel the thoughts in my head that I'm not as good as Joey. It would be nice to give Bella and Logan a reason to be proud of me." He shrugged. "I'd feel pretty good about myself to be able to train hard and accomplish something difficult and last but not least, it would be great to see the pride and approval in your eyes as well."

Eric's lips pressed tightly together in understanding. "Just so you know, you've always had that approval. I couldn't be more proud of you, Mark. You've grown from the little eight-year-old boy I first met to become a man of honor. One who's not afraid to do what needs to be done, who doesn't shrink from a tough decision and who doesn't let the small stuff get in the way. So, Mark, you don't have to fight in the challenge to prove anything to me. The only thing I ask of you is if you decide to fight, I want you to be totally committed. Your best is all I ask and all you can give, because I will give the same."

Mark blew out a breath.

"Don't decide just yet," Eric continued. "Train tomorrow and talk

to JoJo and Bella. Talk to Justin on Monday. Then get back to me. I understand that Joey and Ricky put a little bit of pressure on you by coming to your class. I believe they meant well. At the time they thought you were all in. They came to me this afternoon and said they think they may have messed up."

Mark shrugged. "I can handle the pressure from my class. I won't let that interfere with my decision."

Eric smiled. "As I said, you don't shrink from a tough decision. I am proud of you, Mark. And I do love you."

Mark extended his hand. "The feeling's mutual, Eric."

They clasped hands, patted backs.

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Even though Joey had done nothing all day but eat, rest and watch everyone else train, he had to admit, he was absolutely exhausted. He walked through the door of his loft apartment and tossed his wallet and keys on the kitchen counter.

Breez moved up behind him. "Sit, Joey. Would you like something to eat or drink?"

He slipped onto a bar stool, pulled her close. "No. It pains me to say this, but I'm really tired. I think I'd like to get some sleep."

"I think that's a good decision." She moved forward between his legs, placed her arms on his shoulders and clasped her hands behind his neck. "I'll help you to get settled."

He took her face in his hands. "Breez, I promise I'm not trying to take advantage of you, but, you will stay, right?"

"Yes, Joey. I know I already told you I'm gonna be here to take care of you until you're well."

He nodded. "Yes, but, there's only one bed, and well, I mean, will you sleep *with* me? I feel the need to be close to you. And I understand it's only nine o'clock, but later, you'll come to my bed?"

"I will come to your bed now, Joseph Adams. All those days in the hospital I had to resist the urge to climb into that little hospital bed with you. I just wanted to lie next to you. I wanted to be as close to you as possible. I realized when I couldn't have you, how much I craved you. I craved being near you, kissing you, having you hold me. And I wanted to show you how much I loved you."

"Are you talking about wanting to have sex?"

She smiled. "No. I mean, yes, I want you that way for sure, but I'm

talking about more than that. I guess it's like you used to say to me, you said you wanted more. Suddenly, I felt empty without you there to talk to, to turn to, to share things with. I wanted more. I wanted to share everything with you. I hadn't realized how attached I'd become."

He frowned. "And that doesn't bother you?"

"Why should that bother me?"

He shrugged. "Well, these days, a lot of women don't like the idea of becoming attached, or dependent on a man. People are thinking, or maybe forgetting, that men and women, we need each other. That's the way God designed it. And lately, women seem afraid that they might lose themselves to a man or be dominated by a man."

"You don't have to worry about that. I'm much too strong and independent myself to fret about possibly losing myself to a man."

Joey smiled. "I agree and I think that's what attracted me to you in the first place."

"Really?"

"Well, other than the way you looked in that cute little black skirt you had on."

She grinned. "Power dressing. Works every time."

Slowly, she ran her hands over his shoulders, down his arms to where they rested on his thighs. She rubbed her palms up and down the thickly corded muscles.

He made a soft sound in the back of his throat. A sound that always pleased her, but when she looked at his face, he was frowning.

"What?" she asked.

"You know, I'm, uh, I'm not really up to..."

She laughed. "Sorry. I wasn't trying for that. I didn't mean to start anything. Just can't help wanting to touch all that muscle. You've been laid up for over a week and you're still so strong."

"Don't feel strong. Feeling pretty puny right now."

She stepped back, offered her hand. "C'mon, let's get you into bed."

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Eric entered the music room. Jeffy was jammin' out on the piano while Logan tried his hand at the guitar and JoJo helped Taylor handle the drums. Young Eric was jumping around the room with his version of hip-hop dancing. Shelley, Bella, Mark, Bree and Ricky were an attentive audience.

Jeffy stopped playing when she noticed her father. “Hey Dad! Everything okay?”

He smiled at her as the room quieted. “Yes, at this moment. I just have news from Justin for Bella.”

“Oh,” Bella said, the smile disappearing from her face. She glanced over at Logan.

“It’s about Gordon’s family,” Eric said.

Bella shrugged. “As far as I know, he only had a sister and his mom. Gordon never had anything to do with either of them.”

“Yes, that’s what Justin said. Would you like to speak privately?”

Grasping Mark’s hand, she looked around at the others. “No. I guess I’d rather have the support.”

Eric came in and sat down on a small chair so that she wouldn’t have to look up at him. “Okay, well then, Gordon’s sister and mother are coming to Los Angeles. They’ll be arriving Monday. They want to take Gordon’s body back to New Jersey for burial.”

“Oh,” Bella said again. Her brow furrowed. Mark had mentioned that Justin was looking into things. It sounded like he was handling everything for her.

“Of course,” Eric continued, “you were his wife, and you have the right to decide what to do with the body and what arrangements you want to make.”

“Okay.”

“But, under the circumstances, Justin says he understands you may want to relinquish those rights.”

“To whom?”

“To his family.”

“I see. After all, I did kill Gordon.”

“Not because you fired the gun that killed him, but because of what Gordon did to you.”

Bella nodded, glancing again at Logan whose face was stone hard. “I think that makes sense. It would be for the best to turn arrangements over to his family.”

“Unfortunately, his family is seeking reparation for damages.”

“Damages? For what?”

“For loss of life.”

“But the police already said it was self-defense and no charges will be filed,” Bella said, panic in her voice.

"No, Bella," Mark said softly. "They're talking about a civil matter. A civil suit. It's all about the money. They want money."

Eric nodded. "First, they're gonna immediately want money to transport Gordon back to New Jersey and to pay for funeral expenses."

"Fine. They can have it. I don't care."

"They also intend to hold up Gordon's will."

"Oh," Bella said again. She hadn't even thought about the will.

"Now, Justin says that everything is in Gordon's name except the house which is in both your names. Does that sound correct to you?"

Bella nodded. "Yes," she whispered.

"Fortunately, he left everything to you."

"He did?"

"So it seems."

"What about Logan?"

Eric sighed and glanced at the young man. The truth would hurt but he believed it would be best to get it out and over with. "He doesn't mention Logan. Not at all."

No one in the room missed Logan's head lowering. JoJo and young Eric moved close to him in a gesture of protection and solidarity.

Bella drew her eyes away from her son and back to Eric. "He left nothing to his own son and everything to me?"

"Yes."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Yes, and so does his mother and sister. I mean, they find it hard to believe that he left everything to you."

"I see." She drew a deep breath. "Give it to them, then. I don't want it. They can have it and good riddance."

"Okay," Eric said calmly. "I understand what you're feeling, but that is an emotional response. You need to think about things. You may not want anything to do with Gordon's legacy, but you're giving away a pretty large sum that by rights could be passed down to Logan."

"I don't want it," Logan said quickly.

JoJo immediately had his hand on Logan's shoulder, offering his support. Young Eric had his hand on the other shoulder.

Eric looked to Ricky for help.

Ricky sighed and made a slight shrugging gesture to say that he would try. "Okay, so, Logan, what if you used the money to do something good in the world?" Ricky suggested. "You know, fund

education, pay for medical supplies to poor countries, feed the hungry? Or you could even support Jeffy's *Heal the World Foundation*."

Logan looked to his mother. Her eyes were large and sympathetic and she nodded at him. He looked back up at Grandmaster Kino. "I don't know. Maybe we could do that."

Eric smiled. "Bella, you and Logan think about it, talk about it. You can meet with Justin on Monday and he'll be with you when you meet with Gordon's sister and mother. You have some time."

Bella nodded. "Okay, we'll think about it."

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It took a few minutes for Joey's breathing to return to normal. Eyes closed, he relived the nightmare, took a deep breath, said a quick prayer and asked God to cleanse his mind of the ugliness. He opened his eyes when Breez spoke.

"You okay, Joey?"

"Yeah. Bad dream."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"Not really." He stretched his arm out so she could come closer. Joey smiled. "Come here."

She laid her head on his bicep, her black curls trailing along his arm. She smiled up at him with gorgeous blue eyes. Her fingers trailed over the bandages on his chest, then down to the smaller bandage on his lower abdomen.

"So, how do you feel? Any pain?"

He bent his arm and rubbed his hand over her back. "No pain. I'm good. You good?"

"I'm wonderful. I love sleeping next to you."

"So being here with me is not like, a chore for you?"

She rose, her eyes narrowing. "Please, don't insult me. Joey, I love you. I really, really do."

"So you've said."

"You don't believe me?"

"I want to, but I'm afraid you're just feeling protective."

"Do you know *your* own mind?"

"Yes."

"Well, I definitely know mine. I've felt this way for some time. I just didn't want to tell you because I was afraid of..." She stopped, realizing he wouldn't like what she was about to say.

"You were afraid of what? Tell me."

"In my mind I was thinking that all men were really alike. Eventually, you all show the same colors."

Joey frowned. "You thought I would eventually treat you like Gordon treated Bella?"

"I guess. You even asked me once if I was comparing you to Gordon. It's not really logical, I know. I mean, my father never mistreated my mother. Your father never mistreated your mother. But..."

"Yes he did."

"He did?"

"Not Eric. My real father. Not to the extent Gordon went to, but he was emotionally abusive to her. Called her stupid. Called her fat. Constantly badgered her. He crippled her emotionally. That's pretty much why they got divorced. My mom showed a lot of courage by rising up and divorcing him."

"Oh."

"But Eric has never mistreated her. Jason has never mistreated Angel. Justin has never mistreated Lori. Jeff has never mistreated Mickey."

"Right. And that's what I told myself as I waited to find out if you were gonna live or die. I'd wasted time being illogical. I'd withheld what I actually felt for you out of some preposterous fear that somehow you would turn out like Gordon. I promised that if you survived I would tell you immediately how I felt and then, well, we'd go from there."

He grunted as he rolled onto his side so he could face her.

Breez smiled, appreciating his ruggedly handsome face, his warm brown eyes, his light brown hair with streaks of gold from the sun and his rock-hard body. Even after being in the hospital a week and a half, his shoulders remained broad and strong.

"And do you know, Breez, that I'm in love with you?"

"Yes. I know," she said softly.

"I've never said that to any other woman before you."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

"How many girlfriends have you had?"

"Too many to count."

She frowned.

"After having been in a few movies with Ricky and being his stepbrother, the women just threw themselves at me. I guess I could have taken advantage of that, but I didn't feel good about it. Having sex with just anyone, for the sake of physical pleasure takes away from your, uh, well, your light, your spirit, your aura."

Breez laughed. "Your aura? You're talking like the world's view of a California beach bum."

He chuckled. "Every time a person has sex, he or she gives away a part of themselves. A part of your light and spirit is shared with the other person, and, a part of theirs is shared with you. If people are simply having indiscriminate sex, you know, one-night stands, they're losing a part of themselves and receiving who knows what in return. If one feels something, cares for the person, then it becomes something much different. A sharing of light, so to speak."

"And if they love each other?"

"Then they are creating something very special together. They're creating a spiral of love that goes on forever. They don't lose anything. They add unto each other."

"That is beautiful, Joey. I didn't realize you could be so poetic."

"There's a lot you don't know about me."

"I'm gonna confide something. That first time you and I kissed, I'd intended to have a short, blazing affair with *the* Joey Adams."

"I know," he said softly. "I could feel that and promised myself that was not how it was gonna be. I knew I was attracted to you, but I had no idea when I went to your house that morning that I'd be fighting myself to keep from making love to you on your dining room table. It was the first time I've ever felt totally out of control. Totally out of my element. Like I had no choice in the matter. I knew then that you were someone special and this was not gonna be a one-nighter or even an extended affair. I knew this was gonna be for keeps."

"Thus, you wanting to take me out, get to know me, etcetera."

"Yeah. But really, I never dreamed things would happen as quickly as they have."

She sighed, reached up, stroked the side of his face, which was prickly with more than a day's growth of beard. "Me neither. All I know is, I love you, Joey Adams. I'm grateful you're alive and I don't ever want to be without you."

He bent his head, kissed her softly. "I love you too, Breez. I can't imagine my life without you. You have totally stolen my heart. I don't know what I'm gonna do when I get well and you go back to live in your big house."

"I don't know either. I've thought about selling that house. Before, it seemed I needed to hold onto it. It was all I had left of my parents, of my family. Now, it feels like I might need to just let it go. I feel so free and happy just to know I love you and you love me it's like, I don't need anything else anymore. It's like the emptiness I've felt for so long, ever since my parents died, really, is finally gone."

"I like that house. I wish we both lived there. The thought of seeing you every morning, every night, it would be paradise."

"Oh, so are you saying you want to move in with me?" She frowned. "Is that what you want?"

"No."

"No?"

"I mean, I want more than that, but I was just trying to ease you into the idea, take it one step at a time." He cupped her face. "Breez, I want us to be together. I want you to marry me. Oh, man, maybe I shouldn't have said that. Don't close up on me. Hear me out."

She smiled. "Do I look like I'm closing up on you?"

He looked deeply into her eyes. "Well, no, as a matter of fact."

"I've never, ever lived with a man. I swore I never would unless that man was my husband."

He waited, but she didn't go on. Finally, he realized what she was waiting for. He started to rise from the bed but she placed a hand on his arm to stop him.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna get down on my knees."

"No, you are not," she said indignantly. "If you do I'll say 'no' because I would like to think you know me better than that."

He smiled at her with so much love. "Aww, my Breez. You really do have my heart. You see right through the bull and call it like it is."

She shrugged. "I would never get down on my knees and beg a man for anything, so how could I expect you to do that?"

"Okay, so, I won't get on my knees, but I insist that in our relationship I be allowed to do certain things to help you, like opening doors or carrying heavy bags." He grinned. "It makes me feel useful

and helps me deal with my innate need to protect."

She laughed. "Well, if you put it that way. Besides, I have no problem with a man being masculine."

He pushed her down on the bed, leaned over her, grunting with the pain that the movement caused. "Before we get any further from the subject, Breez, will you take me as your husband? Will you marry me?"

She smiled sweetly. "I will."

His heart tumbled. She lifted her mouth to his. She put her whole self into the kiss. He could feel her love, her passion. "I'm the luckiest man on Earth right now," he whispered. "And, Breez, you may be taking care of me presently, but I promise, I will take such good care of you."

Smiling, she took his hand, kissed his palm. "I'm counting on it."

✝✝✝

Genesis 2:18

"It is not good for the man to be alone.
I will make a helper suitable for him."

Chapter Seventeen

Mark lay in bed watching the dark shapes move slowly over his ceiling. He was in his old bedroom. The curtains were open and the lights from the security gates cast small shadows from the trees whenever the breeze blew. Bella slept across the hall and down two doors in the white room. Ricky and Bree slept in Ricky's old room. Jeffy invited Taylor to stay in her room. The three boys had bunked down in Joey's old room.

He'd thought she might come to him once everyone in the house settled down, thought she might need some comfort, but Bella hadn't come. He'd finally fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion but woke an hour later. So much had happened over the past month. His life had changed completely due to his feelings for a married woman and his need to rescue her. It was providential that his own brother had been assigned to protect her, hired by the woman's sister.

If he had his way, now that Gordon was gone, he would make a family with Bella and Logan and JoJo and himself. He loved her, and he believed she loved him. Easy right? So why did things seem so complicated? Maybe it was because he hadn't really been able to speak with her at length since the night they'd spent together.

He'd only been in her presence a few times since the shooting and he'd had to hold himself back. All day today she'd been quiet, nervous, but he thought with him in the same house she would come to him. Yet, she hadn't. Well, maybe he should go to her. He just hoped she wouldn't freak and rouse the entire household.

Just as he made the decision to go to her, his door opened. Relief flooded through him as he recognized her silhouette. Her black hair was down, falling across her shoulders. She wore a modest nightshirt that came to mid-calf, so why did she look so breathtakingly beautiful? She came in and silently closed the door behind her.

Without speaking a word, he raised the covers and she came to him quickly and slipped in beside him. She turned to him immediately,

buried her face against his chest as his arms came around her.

"I needed you," he said softly. "I'm so glad you came."

She didn't answer, and then he realized, her shoulders were shaking, her body convulsing as she sobbed. Her tears dampened his t-shirt.

He ran his hands over her back, down her shoulders and back again. "There, sweetheart," he murmured in her ear. "Let it out. Let it all out."

She sniffed loudly. "I'm s– sorry."

"Don't apologize, Bella. Cry. Get it all out. You've held yourself together for too long. I'm here now. I'm the one who should be apologizing. I didn't protect you. I wasn't there for you. I'm so sorry you had to go through what you did."

She shook her head against him. "No, no it's not your fault."

"The important thing is it's over. It's over and you're free."

He held her while she cried. He didn't hush her, didn't try to talk to her. He simply held her. It was some time before she quieted with nothing more than slight hiccups left to give.

When it seemed the storm had passed, Mark pulled her away slightly so he could see her eyes in the dim light. "Better?"

She nodded, gave a watery smile. "Mark, do you still..."

He waited, and when she didn't go on, he asked. "Do I still what? Do I still love you?"

She nodded.

"More than ever."

"I need for you to erase the memories. I need to know that I'm still desirable no matter what he did to me. I need new memories."

He suddenly realized she was battling more with the rape the night before Gordon's death than with the shooting.

"Sweetheart, those memories are gonna fade. And I am gonna love you the way you should be loved, when it's right and also when you're healthy and not in a traumatized state of being."

"I can't stand it. I can't stand the way I'm feeling."

He had no idea what a woman needed, at least what she needed emotionally, after she'd been through what Bella had been through. His mother could help in this area, and Eric of course. Right now, he would hold her, be gentle with her, and pray with her.

He rolled over so he could see her. Her face was bruised, her

mouth still swollen and so, as gently as he could, he kissed her face.

His lips skimmed each bruise, the tiny cut on her forehead, her split lip, doing his best to kiss away the pain and the memories. Murmuring soft words, loving words, he continued kissing her until he felt her body begin to relax. "I won't hurt you, Bella," he said softly.

"I know," she whispered. "Don't stop loving me."

"Never," he promised.

He took her hands in his. "Do you know that your Father in heaven is real, and that his love for you is immeasurable?"

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Well, He is real and He does love you. Let's talk to him, Bella. Close your eyes, picture a beautiful man, His countenance filled with light, so bright and warm and powerful— pure love. See Him smiling at you, placing His hand on your head."

"He looks like you," she murmured.

He laughed softly. "No, though I try to be like Him, He's a million times more, infinity times more. See Him, Bella. Father, Bella and I come before you, we need your blessing, we need healing, we need to be touched by your love, we need..."

Mark continued to pray, for what seemed like hours. When he ended the prayer as always, in Jesus' name, Bella softly spoke an "amen." They lay still for long moments, silently experiencing the Spirit of God and relishing the moment of being one with Him and with each other. True love.

When Bella finally spoke, it was only a few words. "That was so beautiful. I want to do it again."

"We will. We'll do it every single day and night."

He started to move, just to change positions, but she grabbed him.

"No, don't leave."

"I'm right here, Bella," he comforted. "I'm not going anywhere."

Mark cleared his throat, looked into her face and realized she wasn't being playful. He sighed, realizing comforting her and healing her wasn't gonna be as easy as he'd presumed.

She lay silently, stroking his chest. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm saying."

He smiled. "You haven't said anything wrong."

She moved close, snuggled up.

He stroked her back. "Bella?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"About what?"

"Anything, really. What you've been through? What he did to you? About Thursday night?"

She sat up, shook her head. "No. I don't want to talk about it."

"It might help, getting all the things out and talked about until they don't hurt anymore."

"I don't want to talk about it, Mark. I just want to go on from here."

"But..."

"I want to be with you. I want us to be together. You and JoJo and me and Logan."

He looked into her eyes, hopeful at what he saw there. "You do?"

"Isn't that what this has been all about? About us making a family?"

"Yes, that's what I want, but I want us to be a strong, happy, healthy family. Not a broken family. I need to give you and Logan time to heal and in order to heal you're gonna have to talk about what happened. Not necessarily with me, but with someone."

"I'm talking with Grandmaster Kino. He said he would help us."

Mark nodded. He didn't want to tell her that Eric doesn't believe she's opening up at all. "He will help you, Bella. Promise me you'll open up to him. That's the only way you can heal."

"I'll tell him everything I can."

"Good."

She sighed heavily. "Are you gonna fight in the Kino challenge?"

"Why?"

"Joey said your heart wasn't in it. That he was worried that you were only gonna do it because he asked you to and not because you want to."

"He's right. That's how it was, but not anymore."

"So you're not gonna fight?"

"I am. However, now I want to do it for me. Eric helped me to realize how much I want to do it, how much I want to win."

Bella smiled. "Will you win, Mark? Because I want you to. I want you to win for me. I know this sounds crazy, but I want you to win as an 'in your face' to Gordon."

"I'll fight for you, Bella. And for Logan and for myself and for my family. And I will win. Eric will see to that."

"I think somehow everything really is gonna be okay," she said.

He gathered her close. "I think so too."

He'd just started to kiss her when they heard the scream.

"Logan!" Bella cried.

They leapt from the bed and ran to the next room.

Logan sat in the middle of the floor; JoJo and Eric both had their arms around him.

Mark knelt beside him. "Logan?"

JoJo and young Eric moved away as Bella knelt beside her son and wrapped her arms around him.

Logan looked up at his mother and then shifted his eyes to Mark. "It, it was a dream I guess."

"More like a nightmare, huh?" Mark said softly. He looked up to see Eric and Ricky back away from the door. "You've been through a lot, Logan. Ya know, bad dreams are sometimes the way our minds get all the bad stuff out."

Logan nodded, looked at his mother. "I'm okay now. Really."

Bella let go of him and stood. "I, uh, are you sure you're okay?" she asked, the worry evident on her face.

He nodded. "Really, I'm okay, Mom. I'm sorry. Why don't you go back to bed?"

Bella looked at Mark.

"You go ahead. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Embarrassed by his words that all but announced they'd been in bed together, she scurried from the room.

Logan let Mark put his arm around him, but he looked up at him with a frown. "You were with my mom?"

Mark nodded. "I hope that doesn't bother you."

He shook his head. "No, sir. It doesn't bother me a bit."

"That's good to know. She's been through a lot and I want to make sure she knows that I'm here for her, and for you too, Logan. You wanna talk about the dream?"

Logan shrugged, looking down at the floor. "I saw my dad being shot. Over and over. Then he fell on the floor and he wasn't moving. I thought he was dead, but then I got close and looked at him and he opened his eyes and grabbed me."

Mark grimaced. “Whoa, classic scary, man. Like right out of a horror movie.”

JoJo and Eric both quickly agreed.

“How ya feelin’ now?” Mark said.

“I’m okay.” He looked over at the kids he now thought of as his brothers. “I got JoJo and Eric, so I’m okay.”

Mark stood. “Okay then. You guys take good care of him.”

“We will,” JoJo said firmly.

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Bella stood nervously beside Justin in the elevator. She was grateful for him. He’d worked tirelessly all weekend to help get her affairs in order while she’d spent Sunday at the Kinos watching Mark and Jeffy train after they’d returned from church.

It was obvious the family was ecstatic that Mark had definitely decided to fight in the challenge. It was interesting and eye-opening to watch how Grandmaster Kino went about grooming someone to become a champion. Jeffy was impressive. Bella couldn’t even imagine being that tough. And then there was Mark. Bella couldn’t keep her eyes off him. She was seeing a tough side of him she’d never seen before, a fierceness that could have actually frightened her had she not known him so well, or, had she not experienced praying with him throughout the previous night.

Bella also had another long talk with Eric and one with Shelley as well. Bella hardly knew them yet she already felt such love and support from them. Shelley had suggested that rather than keep Logan in his school, they transfer him over to the same school JoJo attended. It would be logistically easier and also, that way he’d have JoJo there to support him, and Logan would be able to make a fresh start. They’d thrown the idea out to the boys whose enthusiasm for the idea matched, at the very least, a trip to the seventh game of the World Series.

Meanwhile, Justin had been hard at work, composing a list of Gordon Landow’s assets, drawing up an estate summary and arranging a meeting between Agnes Landow who was Gordon’s mother, Christine Morris who was Gordon’s sister and Reginald Morris, Christine’s husband. The three of them were currently two floors down, seated in a conference room being served coffee.

Shelley had brought Bella into town with her and was doing some shopping while she waited. Mark was in court and then would be in his

office clearing his cases as Justin had directed. Young Eric and JoJo were at school and Logan was watching Grandmaster Kino train Jeffy, doing what he could to help.

Bella looked up at Justin in the elevator.

He smiled at her. "Don't worry. You don't have to agree to anything. You don't even have to say anything if you don't want to."

Bella sighed and nodded. The elevator doors opened and they walked down the hall to the conference room. Justin opened the door for her and she stepped inside.

Two pairs of eyes immediately glared at her. The man stood, smiled and held out his hand. "Mrs. Landow. I don't think we've met. I'm Chris' husband, Reginald Morris, but you can call me Reggie. Everyone does," he said in an accent that Bella could swear came right off the set of *The Sopranos*.

Bella shook his hand then turned to the elder woman. She'd aged badly since the last time Bella had seen her, which was right after Logan was born. The word 'haggard' came to Bella's mind. Her blond hair was now gray. Her blue eyes seemed to also be turning gray. "Agnes," she said quietly. The woman didn't answer. Bella's eyes traveled over to Christine who was in her early forties and blond and blue-eyed just like Gordon. "Hello, Christine," Bella said.

"Lemme juz say this right now," Agnes said loudly. "I got nothin' to say to you. I'm here cuz your fancy lawyer here says you might do the right thing and give us what's rightfully ours."

"Bella, sit down over here," Justin said kindly, directing her to a seat opposite Agnes.

Once Bella was seated, he offered her water or coffee.

"Nothing, thank you," Bella said stiffly.

Justin sat down beside her and turned back to Agnes Landow. "Let me just say right now, that Mrs. Landow does not have to meet with you at all. She agreed because she wanted to hear what you had to say. She agreed because you were once family. This meeting will be held with decorum or it will not be held. Another outburst and my client will leave this room and there will be absolutely no chance for you to appeal to her good graces."

"Oh, uh, she didn't mean nuthin' by it," Reginald said. "I mean, her kid is dead. Maybe you could like, give her some slack."

Bella nodded.

"So, uh, what we wanna know I guess, is what's gonna happen to all that, uh..." Gordon's sister Christine began, but didn't finish.

"All that money?" Bella asked pointedly.

"Yeah. All the money."

"And I guess you think I should give it to you, is that correct?"

"Well, I sure as hell don't think you should get it, you murderer," Christine spat.

Justin began gathering the papers he'd just finished laying out in front of him. "Aaand that denotes the end of the discussion," he said calmly. "I warned you that any more outbursts would not be tolerated. I'll have security es—"

Bella placed her hand on his arm. "Wait, Mr. Lee, it's okay. I have something to say." She raised her chin defiantly. "I actually came to this meeting today with the inclination that I would give it all to you, all but a small part of Gordon's estate. Neither I, nor my son, want anything that was his. However, I've changed my mind. You might not know this, but Gordon intentionally separated himself from you. He did it mostly because he was trying to be something he wasn't, classy and honorable. It didn't work. He used me and abused me. And..."

"And you murdered him," Agnes hissed.

"Justifiable homicide," Justin corrected quickly.

"It was him or me," Bella continued. "I chose life. It didn't have to be that way. I didn't attack him. He attacked me, but I don't expect you to understand. His will clearly states that I get everything, and I will take every single penny and donate it to charity."

"You can't do that," Reginald yelled as he sprang from his seat.

Justin stood. "I would sit down if I were you," he said, his voice deadly calm.

Reginald looked Justin up and down.

Bella smiled because Justin Lee had been trained by Grandmaster Kino, and he was the brother of one of the deadliest men in the world and she had no doubt he could hold his own.

"Mr. Morris," Bella said calmly. "First, you don't know who you're messing with so I suggest you do as he says. Second, I will make you one small concession."

Reginald glanced again at Justin and slipped back into his seat. "What's that?"

"I will allow Agnes to take her son's body home to be buried. I

will pay all expenses for the transportation of his body and will allow a funeral expense of one hundred thousand dollars. Along with that I will gift you another two hundred thousand to help you with any other expenses you may incur."

"Two hundred thousand?" Christine said. "Are you crazy? Gordon was worth millions."

"Total assets of only 10.2," Justin clarified.

Bella shrugged. "It doesn't matter what he was worth. You messed up. Accept the consequences of your own actions. The offer stands."

"How dare you try to..." Agnes began.

"Shut up, Agnes," Reginald said. "Agree to take the body home and the money."

"What?"

"Take it," he said again.

Agnes glared at Bella. "Fine. I'll take his body back to New Jersey and bury him where he belongs, but that's not the end of this. We intend to hold up the will. We will get our share."

"I'm sure you'll get what's coming to you," Bella said firmly.

Christine stood. "You always thought you were better than us. But you are nothing but a murderer. You just remember, Bella, that what goes around comes around."

Bella smiled. "That, dear Christine, is why Gordon is dead."

Justin choked and sprang to his feet before anything could escalate. He quickly ushered the family out the door. Security met them on the other side to escort them from the building.

Justin turned back to Bella with a smile. "Well now, I haven't been so entertained in a very long time. You're a little tiger, you know that?"

Bella sighed. "I guess I shouldn't have said that. It just popped into my head. It wasn't very nice."

"Maybe not, but it was true. You're a pretty tough cookie, Bella. Much stronger than you give yourself credit. No wonder Mark is so taken with you."

Bella smiled. "I'm taken with him too."

"No offense, but that's obvious."

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Over the next several weeks some things went well and some things did not.

Training for the Kino challenge consumed most of every day.

Bella and Breez were amazed at the intensity with which the family threw themselves into this particular endeavor.

"Something worth doing is worth doing well," Joey had explained. He'd taken the time to teach them the whys behind everything, from cardio training to kicking a pad fifty times in a row to the continuous sparring. He explained it so well, that both Bella and Breez were as much into it as everyone and hollered encouragements to Jeffy and Mark during sparring matches with rigorous enthusiasm.

Joey's health continued to improve and he started working out in very small doses. He'd already gained back some of the lost muscle and weight. He'd gone back to work, finished his training in the accounting department and moved on to human resources.

Breez met with some friends of the Kinos, showed off her portfolio and received word that the spring would bring her very first art show. Thrilled to feel like she'd actually accomplished something, she left Joey's loft apartment and moved back home where she began several new pieces. Joey alternated between his own apartment, Breez's house and his parents' place. Most times, however, Breez and Joey were inseparable. They kept their engagement a secret for now. Nothing was to interfere with training for the challenge and Joey was sure once they told his mom, she would go crazy and not be able to concentrate on matters at hand.

Logan transferred and went back to school. He stayed after to watch JoJo's football practices and attended the last two games along with the rest of the family. Every day after school someone was there to pick them up but they never knew who it was gonna be. Sometimes it was Mark, most times Bella. Now and again it would be Shelley or Joey and on very special days, it would be Ricky with Eric in tow.

Bella and Logan needed to retrieve their personal belongings from the house. Mark, Breez and Joey had gone along with them to help ease the way, but it was still not a very pretty time. Bella had collapsed and Logan had become ill.

As it turned out, selling the house was also not going well with the fact that a man had died in the upstairs bedroom. Along with that, Gordon's family had done exactly what they'd threatened and contested the will. It could end up being a battle fought for years.

Bella and Logan had many sessions with Eric both joint and separate. The process was slow-going and more times than not, the

sessions ended in tears for Bella and anger for Logan. Eric felt frustrated and turned to colleagues for advice. They all felt the same; until Bella and Logan could be honest with themselves and with him, not much progress could be made.

Eric tried to talk them into seeing someone else. Someone they felt they could open up to, but both Bella and Logan insisted Eric was the only one they could talk to. They also insisted they were being honest, but Eric wasn't buying it. Even though Bella seemed to be doing a little better, he had the feeling all was not as it should be. He began to wonder if maybe she pulled that trigger a little too quickly and felt guilty. Still, she smiled sometimes. She reached out to Mark and Logan and even JoJo with interest and with loving gestures which was an important part of healing.

Logan, on the other hand, was becoming more and more difficult. His grades plummeted. He kept his head down. He rarely spoke, rarely smiled and never looked anyone in the eye. Eric enlisted the help of the rest of the family in getting him to talk about things, but it seemed that no one was able to get through to him. The only ones who made any progress with Logan were the boys, JoJo and young Eric.

Eric knew about the oath they'd taken to be brothers. He also realized that they took it very seriously and truly meant it. He'd spoken to the boys, telling them that Jesus said we should avoid taking oaths, however, if we did take one, it should never be broken, which in circular thinking means, we should avoid it. He went on to explain that giving their word is good enough. He added that there are exceptions, for example, people take vows before God when they marry. He wasn't condemning the boys, as some Christians would, however, he was explaining how important it is to not do things lightly without thought and prayer. He'd also pointed out that those Christians who condemn based on scripture, are quick to forget about not judging others, also based in scripture. He explained that Jesus knows our hearts and it's a good thing that He will be our judge and not the self-righteous Christians who are so quick to condemn."

Subsequently, the boys were adamant about being brothers to Logan. Whenever the family was together, you could find the three boys with their heads together off by themselves, either in a separate room or sitting at the far end of the room or walking down by the beach. He was glad Logan at least had JoJo and young Eric, still, he

wouldn't give up on the child.

Presently, Eric watched the boys from the dining room glass door. It was the rainy season in southern California, however, today, the rain had let up for a few hours. The threesome walked down toward the ocean. JoJo reached up and patted Logan's back. Young Eric pointed at something on the beach. JoJo and Eric went over to inspect but Logan just stood there looking out to sea.

Eric's mouth tightened. He'd never felt so much at a loss. He'd prayed, he'd fasted, he just couldn't seem to break through. He'd never been in a situation where he couldn't get through to someone. He knew someone who could, though. Dare he call on his daughter to help? Would he cause her any harm? He should at least give her a choice, he thought. She would want him to give her the choice.

He sighed, worrying that if he didn't break through soon, Logan may be lost. He glanced around when he felt the hand on his back. Shelley smiled up at him.

"Hello, my love," she said as she followed his line of vision out to the boys on the beach. "Wonder what they're up to now."

"Hard to tell," Eric answered.

Shelley turned to him and placed her hand on his cheek. "You'll get through to him somehow."

"I'm not so sure about that."

Shelley frowned, because, honestly, Logan did seem to be drifting away. "Well, maybe it will just take time. Possibly a few years."

"Possibly."

"I have faith in you, Eric, and I know you have faith in God and I'm sure He'll answer your prayers. He's got this. He's got you and Logan. Something will come to you."

He took her hand, kissed her palm. "Thank you for that, my Shelley girl." He brushed some hair from her face, a particular habit of his. "Have I told you lately how lucky I am that you came into my life?"

"Every time you smile at me," she whispered.

They clasped hands and turned back to watch the boys.

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Logan woke, his heart in his throat. He'd managed to keep himself from screaming this time. Still, it took several minutes for his body to quit trembling and his heart to slow.

He sat up, peeked over at JoJo asleep in the other bed. JoJo and Eric had been true blue through this whole thing. They understood him. They didn't treat him like he was weird. They took it all in stride and he was thankful that they'd befriended him that day up in the special place in the canyon. It wasn't that everyone else bothered him, or was mean to him. He just felt weird around everyone. He knew Master Mark was in love with his mom. He was glad his mom had someone to take care of her. He really was. So, why did he feel so alone?

Master Mark took time to talk to him every day. Logan knew he was trying to be like a father to him. That was more than his own father ever did. His own father didn't even acknowledge that Logan existed. Not during his life and not even in his will. Mark took time to make Logan feel cared for and important. There was a time that Logan wanted that real bad. So, why did he push Mark away now?

It was like there was this big empty hole in his heart and he couldn't make himself feel anything for anyone. He tried. But he just couldn't. He tried to cry because both Mark and Grandmaster Kino said it would make him feel better. But he couldn't cry. He didn't feel bad enough to cry. And why should he? Because his real father is dead? Logan was glad he's dead. Glad. And he wasn't gonna let anyone tell him it was wrong to feel that way.

He looked down at his hands and realized they were shaking. He balled them into fists. He couldn't go on like this. Life was miserable and he was sick and tired of feeling miserable. Life had become hell and he didn't want to go on like this anymore. So, he thought, I won't.

It hit him. He didn't have to keep suffering. He could make it stop. Why hadn't he thought about this before? Why had he let this feeling go on and on, suffering through every minute of every hour of every day?

He glanced at JoJo again— and then he pushed back the covers and climbed out of bed.

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When JoJo woke, he was surprised to see that Logan was already up. JoJo usually had to practically drag Logan out of bed. His dad told him that was because Logan was depressed and that it wouldn't last forever. JoJo could hardly wait because he was ready to get on with the cool life he and Logan had planned, being brothers, living together. Being a family with a mom and a dad and two kids. It was gonna be

awesome. For now though, his dad asked him to be patient. He said it was the best way to help Logan. JoJo had no problem with that. Neither did Eric.

He took his time in the bathroom, finally got dressed and went downstairs to see what Logan was having for breakfast.

"Good morning, JoJo," Bella said sweetly.

JoJo smiled at her. She was so nice. He couldn't wait for when his dad married her and they all lived together. He wondered if she would ever like him as much as her own son. Even if she didn't, he knew she would try and that would be good enough. "Hey, Ms. Bella," JoJo said.

"Mornin' son," Mark said as he drank down a protein shake.

"Hey Dad."

"Where's Logan?" Mark asked.

JoJo's face showed the confusion he felt. "Huh?"

"You know, Logan?" Mark teased.

JoJo suddenly felt sick. "He's not down here?"

Bella turned from taking the milk from the refrigerator. "No, he's not down here. Isn't he upstairs getting dressed?"

"Um, he's not in our room."

Mark stood quickly. "Go check again."

"Yes, sir."

JoJo dashed up the stairs calling Logan's name.

Shelley and Jeffy came out in the hall. "Why are you yelling?"

JoJo faced them, his face pale. "We can't find Logan."

"What do you mean you can't find him?" Shelley asked.

"He wasn't in bed this morning when I got up. I thought he was downstairs having breakfast, but he's not."

Shelley's heartbeat accelerated. She could hear Mark and Bella calling his name as they searched the rest of the house. She turned and flew back into her bedroom where Eric was in the shower.

"Eric, Logan is gone," she cried.

Eric quickly dried and dressed. When he got downstairs, he found Bella coming in the glass doors that led out to the deck and pool and eventually to the beach. Her face was pale, her fear palpable. "I searched the pool area, the pool house, everywhere out back I could think of. He's not there."

"Where's Mark?" Eric asked.

Her hand over her mouth she turned and pointed outside. "He went

down toward the beach."

"Shelley, Jeffy, JoJo, I want every inch of this house searched."

Outside, Mark ran along the beach, hoping to find Logan curled up in the sand somewhere. The rain had erased any footprints he may have made. He ran north a few hundred feet, searched among some low lying rocks. Nothing. He turned and looked out to sea.

The ocean was steely gray, uninviting and unforgiving. Please, God, Mark prayed, please help me find him. He headed back south, keeping his eyes open for any irregularity in the sand. He'd been gone a good twenty minutes by the time he came back inside.

Bella stood by the door, her eyes wide, her body trembling. "Where could he be, Mark? You don't think he..."

Mark took her in his arms, pulled her close. "No. I don't. We'll find him. Somehow, we'll find him."

Jeffy came in through the front door. She was soaking wet. "He's not out in the front yard or on the side of the house."

"Jeffy," Mark said. "Can you tell me anything?"

She blinked slowly. "I, I think he's okay. I think he is. That's all I can say right now."

"What if you go up to his room, sit on his bed?"

She nodded. "I'll try."

Mark looked up to see his mother standing on the stairs. He thought she might try to keep Jeffy from trying, but she merely nodded her head. "We'll go with you, Jeffy."

They went to Joey's old bedroom where the boys had been staying. Jeffy sat on Logan's bed, pulled his blanket up around her shoulders.

She immediately began to cry. "He's so sad," she whispered. "He's so empty and confused. Bless his heart." She gasped, her body jerked. Her eyes darted to Bella who immediately looked away.

"What is it?" Shelley asked.

Jeffy shuddered, stood. "I think Logan is alive. I don't know if he's okay right now, but I think he will be." She turned to Mark abruptly. "You're the one in danger."

He shook his head impatiently. "Jeffy, you've said that before and I'm still here aren't I?"

Her eyes flashed. "You asked me to try and I did. You're in danger. That's all I have to say."

"Where's Eric?" Mark asked.

Shelley motioned down the hall. “He’s in the security room reviewing video, trying to find what time Logan left the house, how he left and maybe which direction he headed.”

“Good idea. Mom, will you call Joey and Ricky? They can help look for him.”

“I already have. They should be here within the next thirty minutes.”

Mark nodded, and hurried down the hall and up the short flight of steps to the security room.

“Anything yet?” he asked.

Eric backed up the video he’d been looking at. “Not yet. I’m reviewing the back of the house first. There’s no way Logan could’ve left through the front security gate. The only way out without waking the household would be along the beach.”

Mark settled in a seat beside him.

Bella paced back and forth in the hall, stopping every once in a while to see if they’d found anything yet. Her baby was out there somewhere in the rain, feeling sad and lost. She could see him in happier times, laughing with her, helping her make dinner, playing in the pool. She could see him when he was a little boy, playing with cars and dinosaurs and Play-Doh. She could see him blink up at her with those big, blue eyes. And now, all she wanted was to see those eyes again.

The others arrived. Joey and Ricky joined Mark and Eric in the security room. Breez and Shelley and Bree went to the kitchen, needing to do something to keep their hands and thoughts occupied.

JoJo and young Eric huddled on the living room sofa, talking quietly. Jeffy had retreated to her room. Taylor sat on her father’s lap in the security room. And Bella stood alone in the hall, realizing it was all her fault. If not for her, Logan wouldn’t be missing. If not for her, Logan would be fine.

“Wait,” Mark said. “There! Back it up.”

It seemed the entire household heard Mark’s words. Suddenly everyone was crowded into the security room, leaning over the screen.

Eric went back as Mark directed. Sure enough, there was Logan leaving the house through the back glass door a little before four o’clock in the morning. He moved slowly across the deck, past the pool and down toward the beach. They quickly changed to the beach

camera. Logan walked out toward the ocean until the water was up to his calves.

They all held their breath as he stood there staring out to sea, fearful that they would see him walk on out and disappear beneath the waves. There was a giant exhale as they watched him turn away and head south along the beach.

"He could be heading toward the rock outcropping. He knows if he climbs to the top it will lead him out to the street," Ricky offered.

Eric glanced at his watch. It'd already been an hour since they'd realized Logan was gone. "It's 8:10 now. That means he has a four-hour head start."

"The question is, where is he headed? Is his plan to simply run away? If so, he would head into LA," Joey said.

"I think I know where he's going," JoJo offered. "I think he might try to get to the canyon."

"Which canyon?" Mark asked.

"The one we went to," young Eric said, nodding his head in agreement. "*Pale Leaf Canyon*."

"He talked about it all the time, I mean, we did," JoJo explained. "The day we all went there, it was like, special I guess. Just last night Logan said he wished we could go back and I told him after the challenge we could probably talk you guys into going."

"What makes it so special? Why did he want to go back so badly?" Shelley asked.

"We, uh, we did a meditation while we were there," Eric said. "Just me, JoJo and Logan. It was like, the best one I've ever done. It was like great-grandfather was there," he said with a shrug, looking earnestly at his father.

Ricky nodded at him. "Go on."

"I could swear he was right there, like, floating over us."

Ricky thought of his grandfather, lovingly referred to as Tutu Kino. He eyed his own father whose eyes had moistened, apparently at the idea of his father coming to visit his grandson.

"Yeah, and it felt like my mom was there," JoJo said. "I mean, I've never met her, but somehow I knew she was there. And Logan, he said his grandparents were there. He said he could smell them and heard them say they loved him."

"And then he had a dream like a week later," young Eric went on.

"Where they came to talk to him and told him stuff but he couldn't remember what they'd said in the dream except for one thing."

"What was the one thing?" Ricky asked.

"He remembered they said Bella Bear," JoJo answered.

Breez gasped and looked around for her sister but didn't see her in the room.

"It was like a really special day," young Eric added.

"And that's the day you all took your blood oath?" Mark asked.

"Yes, sir," Eric answered.

"And that is what you guys were always talking about?"

"Mostly," JoJo said. "It was a really good feeling in the canyon. So maybe Logan is going back there, to, like, you know, talk to his grandparents again or just to pray and talk to God."

"We tried to do other prayers and meditations, like on the beach and stuff, but we didn't feel the same thing we felt that day," Eric explained.

"Okay," the eldest Eric said. "He may be trying to get to the canyon which is over an hour away by car. I think we need to enlist the help of the authorities."

"Jason is standing by to take care of that. He's waiting for our okay," Joey said.

Eric nodded. "Okay, give him a call and give him the details. The rest of us will head up there."

Mark nodded. "Let's not waste any more time."

"Wait," Bella said softly.

Everyone stopped to see what she had to say.

"I need to tell you something before you call the police."

Joey took his phone away from his ear. Bella, who'd been standing on the stairwell outside the security room door moved into the space in the center of the room and faced Grandmaster Kino.

"It's my fault," she said.

He smiled kindly at her. "All mothers think when a child..."

"No. This is important. You need to listen," Bella said.

"You do," Jeffy said strongly. "Hear what she has to say."

Bella glanced at Jeffy and realized that the young psychic already knew what she was about to confess.

"I think it's important that you know why Logan has had such a difficult time. Why he's been so unhappy. It's my fault. I thought I was

protecting him, but it seems I've done just the opposite. I've hurt him, and if anything happens to him I'll never be able to forgive myself."

Mark reached out, touched her shoulder. "Bella, you shouldn't..."

"I didn't kill Gordon. Logan did," she said quickly.

One could've heard a pin drop.

Bella sniffed as a tear ran over her cheek. "Logan was supposed to be at school, playing flag football with his friends. He'd been coming home, eating a snack, and going back, but on that day I was sick and he didn't want to leave me, but I asked him to go for me. I told him it would make me feel better to know he was out having fun. Right after Logan left– Gordon, he came home and busted in the door to my room. He drug me down the hall to his bedroom. He beat me up. All that part was true." She stopped and shook her head as if to clear it.

"He, he was gonna kill me. He had his hands around my throat. I felt myself blacking out. And then," she stopped as her body shuddered. "It seemed like I could hear Logan's voice coming from far away. He said, 'Dad, stop. Let her go or I'll kill you.' Gordon did what he said. He let go of me and I fell to the floor.

"I turned over and got to my hands and knees. Logan had the gun. I don't know how he knew it was in my dresser drawer. All I know is he had it in his hands and pointed at his father. I looked up at Gordon who had such a look of rage on his face. I figured Logan would never really fire that gun. I was afraid Gordon would realize that and then he was gonna hurt Logan, so I asked Logan to put the gun down. Logan looked over at me for just a second. And then," she drew a breath. "And then Gordon said he was gonna kill us both. He started toward Logan and I screamed and Logan pulled the trigger."

Mark closed his eyes as he imagined the scene as it took place.

"The bullet hit him in the shoulder," Bella continued. "Gordon sort of stumbled back. I remember feeling relieved, that now that Gordon knows Logan *would* pull the trigger, we could keep the gun pointed at Gordon and get away, but Gordon just went crazy. He began yelling obscenities at Logan and charged at him. Logan fired again. That time the bullet hit him dead center."

Joey ran a hand over his own chest thinking how close he'd come to death.

"Gordon fell down immediately. He landed on his back. I remember everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. All I could

think about was Logan was gonna be in trouble. I didn't even know if Gordon was actually dead, but you hear about it all the time, kids or wives who kill their abuser in self-defense and then end up going to jail for the rest of their lives. It's so unfair, and I was not gonna let that happen to Logan.

"I remember grabbing Logan. I yelled at him. I said, 'why did you come home?' He said he got almost all the way to school and got worried about me. He said he had a strong feeling come over him that he needed to get home. How could I argue with that?"

"You couldn't," Shelley said softly.

"I tried to think quickly. I'd heard something about the police knowing if someone fired a gun by the residue on your hands so I made Logan go scrub his hands in his own bathroom. I told him to go back to school. Go through the backyard and cut through the woods. I told him to make sure the other kids see him and if they ask where he's been to tell them he had some extra homework to do before he came back. Then I took the gun, wiped Logan's handprints off and then fired it myself. Then I called 911.

"I told Logan he had to be the best actor he could be. He had to pretend that when he got home he didn't know what had happened. That no matter what, he had to promise me he would never ever tell anyone the truth about what happened. That even if they arrest me for killing Gordon he had to never tell. I made him promise and I reminded him how important it was, how honorable it was for him to keep a promise he made to his mother. And then, I told him, he and I would never speak of this incident again. Not ever."

She stopped, held her hands to her stomach. "I was trying to protect him. And now, he's gone. He's suffering and it's all my fault. If anything happens to him, I don't know how I can bear it."

Mark hugged her. "That's enough of that. We'll find him and we'll work everything out. People make mistakes, Bella. Asking Logan to live a lie was a mistake, but your motive was honorable." He looked around the room. "I doubt anyone here thinks otherwise."

There was a murmuring of agreement.

Eric stood. "And because it was honorable, at least until we have more time to think about it, we'll protect your confidence." He looked around. "What we've just heard goes no further than our family," he said firmly. "At least for now. Are we agreed?"

Again an affirmative murmuring.

"Okay, let's move out," Ricky said. "I suggest we go in several vehicles so we can widen the search if needed."

"Dad, can I ride with Uncle Mark and JoJo?" young Eric asked.

Ricky nodded.

"Shelley, maybe you wouldn't mind staying home just in case he makes his way back?" Eric asked.

"No, I don't mind," she said. "Whatever helps the most."

He smiled at her, a smile filled with the love and adoration he felt. He turned that smile on his daughter. "Jeffy?"

"It would only be logical for me to stay with Mom," she said quickly. "If I get anything, I'll call you."

It took only a few minutes for the family to make their plans and head out the door in four different cars, taking four different routes to the same location. Once Joey spoke to Jason, they knew they would have all available Ameritech agents on the search as well.

As Mark drove he instructed the boys to keep their eyes peeled. He glanced at Bella whose face was pale and drawn. He took her hand. "We'll find him," he said.

She squeezed his hand in response.

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Proverbs 19:9

"A false witness will not go unpunished,
and he who breathes out lies will perish."

Chapter Eighteen

Logan grunted as his body rolled down the steep side of the ravine. He finally came to an abrupt halt at the bottom. A few more feet and he would've landed in the rushing water. He looked back up toward the roadway that he'd just taken a tumble from, thanks to the driver in the large black sedan who'd practically run him over. Granted, it was pouring down rain and they probably couldn't see a kid in blue jeans and black T-shirt walking along the shoulder of the road. Besides, no one would think a kid would even be out here walking along this road in the pouring rain and on a regular school day.

He looked down at the hole torn in the knee of his jeans and saw that he was bleeding. His hands were also scratched and bloody because he'd tried to grab at a few rocks and trees to stop his fall. Standing, he drew a deep breath and started the difficult climb back up to the road. It was muddy and slippery and he knew it was gonna take him some time to make it back up, but he didn't care. He wasn't in a hurry because nothing mattered anymore.

He was close now, he knew. Maybe just a few miles from the turnoff that led to *Pale Leaf Canyon*. The man who'd given him a ride and dropped him off at the main canyon road had been sympathetic to the plight of a young, misunderstood boy who'd run away from his father and was traveling to his mother's home. It seemed it was getting easier and easier to lie, Logan thought.

After falling twice more, he used his fingers as claws and dug the toes of his Nikes into the soft mud on the side of the hill and finally made it to the top of the embankment. This time, as he walked along the side of the road, he listened carefully for approaching vehicles.

He was tired and cold and hungry, but none of that mattered. He had to make it to the canyon. That's where everything would end. Thank goodness. Ever since that day he and JoJo and Eric had done the meditation there, he knew he had to go back. First, he'd wanted to go back just to have that amazing feeling again. Now, he wanted to go

back to make the awful feeling inside of him go away and if it didn't work, then he would take matters into his own hands.

He had no idea how long he'd been walking. With the rain and cloud cover he couldn't tell what time of day it was. He wiped his nose on the back of his hand as he came around the next curve in the road and there it was, the large sign announcing the entrance to *Pale Leaf Canyon.*

Logan began to run, but after running for several minutes he realized their special place must be a lot farther up the road than he remembered. His side stinging, he slowed down to a walk but kept trudging along. Even if it was still a long way, he knew he was almost there.

It seemed he'd been walking forever when he recognized the picnic area they'd used. This was the place. Moving quickly now, even though his teeth chattered and his body felt sore and stiff, he climbed the last quarter mile to the top of the cliff and went straight to the very edge.

He had to admit, it looked different in the rain. When he'd been there before it had been warm and sunny, the sky had been blue and it had seemed they were surrounded by light. Today it was gray and wet and cold and very uninviting. Still, this was the place.

Logan circled around to find the perfect place to sit right on the edge, then he pulled his legs in as close as he could, closed his eyes and tried to pray.

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Mark drove faster as the feeling of urgency increased. Bella reached out to hold onto the dash and glanced in his direction, but didn't say anything. She wanted her son. Needed to hold him close. She wanted to laugh with him and bake him cookies and help him with his homework.

She looked over at Mark, his brow furrowed, his jaw tense. He'd patiently and unselfishly done everything he could to help her and Logan. He'd demanded nothing of her except that she not give up hope. Hope was all she clung to right now.

They passed the sign for *Pale Leaf Canyon* and she held her breath. It wouldn't be long now. Please be there, Logan, she thought. Please. If he wasn't there, where would they look? Anything could've happened to him. No, she couldn't think like that.

"Here," Eric and JoJo both yelled.

The car slammed to a halt. Mark jumped from the car. He didn't wait for her. Neither did JoJo and Eric who leapt from the back seat and followed Mark running up the hill. Bella tried to keep up.

When Mark got to the top of the hill, he stopped, held his hand up to stop the others. Logan stood on the edge of the cliff looking down. Mark turned, spoke quietly to JoJo and Eric. "You guys have your cell phones with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Call the others and tell them Logan is here. They should be driving up any minute."

Mark moved again, going slowly this time, trying to get as close as he could. Logan was standing so close to the edge, he didn't want to startle him.

When Bella caught up with the boys they stopped her, put their fingers to their lips and whispered that he was there. She closed her eyes in gratitude. Eric went back down to make the phone calls. JoJo stayed with Bella and the two of them slowly moved toward the top of the hill. When Bella saw Logan standing on the edge of the cliff, she gasped.

Logan spun around.

Mark quickly held his hands up to him. "It's okay, Logan. Be careful. It's okay."

Logan didn't answer. He only stood there staring.

"Logan, I want you to do me a big favor and take one large step forward, toward me."

Logan only stood there, a blank look on his face.

"Please, son. One step forward."

Logan stepped forward and Mark let out the breath he was holding.

"Do you mind if I come up there to talk to you?" Mark asked.

Logan shook his head. Mark came forward until he was about ten feet away.

"Stop," Logan said softly.

Mark stopped immediately.

"Do you want to talk about this?" Mark asked.

"No, sir."

"Your mom, she's really worried about you. Why don't you come down to the car where it's warm and we can talk all this out."

Logan looked past Mark to his mother who he could tell was shivering. "Go back to the car, Mom," he said.

"Logan, please," she cried.

"I don't want you here."

"I can't leave you, baby. I can't."

Logan looked back at Mark. Mark shrugged his shoulders. "She loves you, Logan. You know she's stubborn. She won't leave you. Neither will I."

"How did you know I was here? JoJo and Eric?"

"They told me you might be here. They're really worried about you. They say you're their brother and they'd do anything for you."

Logan looked back over his shoulder, glancing down at the river far below. He turned back to Mark. "I need for it to stop," he said.

Mark nodded, understanding immediately. Logan was talking about the pain in his heart. "It will eventually. It takes time. What's one of the first things you learned in my class? Something we stress every class."

"Um, patience?"

"Right. You must have patience, Logan. It takes time for the bad feelings to go away."

"I can't take any more."

Mark swallowed. "Yes, you can. You're strong and you're just as stubborn as your mom."

Logan stepped backward.

Mark immediately ran forward two steps. "Logan, wait."

Logan stopped and Mark caught his breath. "You have to listen to me. I know what really happened."

Logan glanced at his mom.

"She told us. She told everyone. Your mom made a mistake. She shouldn't have asked you to keep such a hard secret. What you did wasn't bad or wrong. You saved your mom's life. He was gonna kill her and you saved her, Logan. I'm so grateful to you for that."

"You are?"

"Of course I am. If you'd been too afraid to pull that trigger, your mom would be dead and probably you too. I'm so grateful that you were strong and brave enough to pull that trigger. You won. Don't you see? If you jump off that cliff, Logan, then he wins. Don't let him win."

"I keep having this dream where he's not really dead. He opens his

eyes and he gets me."

"Your dream is playing out your fears. Listen, Logan, if you hurt yourself, then it will be just like he gets you. Don't let him win. Let us help you. Isn't it worth a try?"

Logan didn't answer.

"Now that everyone knows what happened, now that you don't have to keep that hard secret anymore, it will get better much faster. Won't you even give it a chance? Have I ever lied to you?"

Logan thought hard. "I don't think so."

"Give it a chance, son. Please. Let me repeat what I just said and listen carefully. Now that everyone knows what really happened, it will get better fast. Don't you already feel a little better just knowing that I know what really happened?"

Logan had to be honest. He did feel like something had been lifted off his shoulders. He nodded his head.

"Have you thought about what it would do to your mom and me and JoJo and Eric and your Aunt Breez and everyone else if you were to jump? We would be devastated. Not only that, your mom would never forgive herself. It would kill her. Have you thought about that?"

Logan shook his head. "No. I just wanted it to stop."

Mark nodded. He understood that. People say those who try to commit suicide are selfish, but he knew that wasn't the case. People who try to kill themselves are blinded by the pain they feel. They aren't thinking about anything other than stopping the pain they feel in their hearts. The pain blocks out everything else. He offered Logan a warm smile. "Well, now that you have a few seconds to think about it, I want you to think hard about what it would mean to your mom."

Logan blinked several times. "I don't want to hurt my mom."

"Good, that's good. Your mom has already been hurt too much, don't you think?"

"Yes, sir," Logan said softly.

"Now, she has a chance to be happy, but she won't be if anything happens to you. Please, Logan, give her the chance to be happy."

Logan thought for a long time before he finally nodded his head.

Mark blew out a breath, took a step forward. "Can I come stand next to you?"

Logan nodded, shrugged. "You know, I was actually scared to do it. I was trying to get up the courage." He twisted to look back over his

shoulder, swung his arm wide. "It's a long way dow..."

He lost his balance. His arm swung in huge circles. Mark dove for him as Bella and JoJo screamed. Mark landed on his stomach, his hand digging into the slender arm he'd caught. Logan dangled over the edge of the cliff. He looked up into Mark's eyes.

"Don't move," Mark said through clenched teeth. "I'm losing my grip. JoJo," he yelled. "Hold onto my legs," he ordered.

Mark felt JoJo, and he presumed Bella, throw themselves down on the back of his thighs. Logan's wet arm was sliding through Mark's hand. Mark reached down with his other hand. "Give me your other hand," he said firmly.

"I, I can't," Logan said. "If I do, it feels like it will pull my other arm out of your hand."

He slipped farther down until Mark was holding only Logan's hand.

"I'm gonna fall," Logan said, his eyes wide with fear.

"No you're not. Don't let go."

"I'm slipping."

Mark knew he was right. He couldn't let it end this way. "Listen to me, Logan. I'm gonna swing you out and then in and you'll land on the second ledge."

"But..."

"You're gonna land on that lower ledge."

He didn't give him time to argue, but immediately swung Logan way out and when his body swung inward toward the cliff face, Mark released his hand.

Bella screamed again. Mark scrambled to the edge. Logan sprawled on the ledge just below the cliff. "Logan, sit with your back against the cliff wall. I'm gonna get a rope from my car. I'll be right back. I'll be down there with you in a second. You're gonna be fine."

Mark rose and turned to JoJo and Bella. "Lie on your stomachs and talk to him until I get back."

They complied immediately. Mark ran toward his car. Young Eric was halfway down still on the phone. "Where are they?" Mark asked.

"They're almost here."

"Send them up the moment they get here."

"Yes, sir."

Mark grabbed rope from the back of his vehicle and ran back up

the hill. Tying one end securely to the closest tree, he prayed the rope would be long enough to lower himself down to the ledge below. He stretched it out and watched it dangle over the cliff. Plenty of length. Good. He pulled it back up, tied the end around his waist and lowered himself over the edge of the cliff.

"Please be careful, Mark," Bella cried.

JoJo took her hand. "He's good at stuff. He'll be okay and he'll get Logan back up here. Everything is gonna be okay now."

Bella smiled at Mark's son, who was so much like his father. She squeezed his hand. "Thank you, JoJo."

"I'm down here with Logan," Mark called up. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Dad, I hear you."

He untied the rope from his waist, keeping a firm grip on it. "I'm gonna tie the rope to make a harness for Logan. When Joey and Ricky and Eric get here, tell them I need them to pull Logan up."

"Yes, sir," JoJo answered.

It was only a few minutes later that the troops arrived. Eric and Ricky took a firm hold of the rope before untying it from the tree. With the rope freed, they began hauling Logan upward while Joey waited near the edge to help ease him over the rocks. Joey removed the harness, wrapped a blanket around Logan's shoulders and lifted him in his arms to carry him away from the cliff's edge. When he set him down, Bella, Breez and Bree took over.

Joey went back to the cliff edge, tossed the harness end of the rope back down. "Let us know when you're ready," he yelled down to Mark.

Joey turned back to Eric and Ricky who stood closer to the tree so they would have some leverage. "Get ready, guys. I guess I don't need to tell you it's gonna be a little harder since Mark's got about a hundred pounds on Logan."

Ricky grinned. "I think we can handle it, gunshot boy. Since you're milking it for all it's worth, you just stand there and look pretty."

Joey smiled. "I can do that." Then seriously, he nodded to JoJo and young Eric. "You guys help pull the rope."

The boys got into the "tug of war" line. Mark secured the rope around his waist and tested the knot.

"Okay, I'm ready," Mark shouted. "Tell them to start slowly so I don't hit my head on the rock above me. I need time to swing out over

the canyon."

"Will do," Joey yelled back. He turned to Ricky. "He says..."

Ricky waved him off. "We heard. We're not deaf."

Regardless of their banter, Joey knew it wasn't gonna be easy to pull Mark up and over the cliff. Mark was 6'3" of solid muscle. Even with all the training and conditioning he'd been doing lately, he was probably still over two hundred.

They began to pull the rope, had only brought back about six inches when Mark yelled up that he was clear. Joey turned to watch to see if they were gonna need his help. The boys and Eric and Ricky pulled, their legs braced, their forearm muscles bulging, but then the unthinkable happened. The rope began to break, popping strand by strand and unraveling as he watched. Joey's eyes opened wide.

"No," he cried as he dove for the rope.

The women screamed.

"Dad!" JoJo cried.

Joey was able to grab the rope but was being pulled over the side. Ricky and Eric dove for him and were able to bring his body to a halt just at the edge of the cliff. The three of them struggled to hold onto the short length of rope. Joey had it wrapped around his wrist and felt like his hand would be severed at any moment.

Eric and Ricky had grabbed the rope just a few inches down from Joey's wrist, trying to relieve the pressure.

"Someone call Jason and tell him we need a rescue chopper," Ricky yelled before he turned back toward the cliff. "Mark, you okay?"

"Tell me the rope didn't break."

"I can't do that."

"Well hell, can you pull me up?"

"Trying to get some leverage right now," Ricky said with a grunt, "and keep Joey's hand from being torn off. He has the rope wrapped around his wrist."

"You tell my brother to let go and unwind the rope from his hand right now."

Joey closed his eyes with the pain. "You know I can't do that, bro," he said. "We're havin' a little trouble holding your weight. If I let go, you're goin' down."

"Eric," Mark called. "Eric, how bad is it? Logically, can you guys pull me up and maintain your own safety?"

Ricky and Joey frowned. They knew he asked Eric because he would tell Mark what he wanted to know, however Eric surprised them.

"Logically speaking, Mark," Eric said as he struggled to hold the rope, "we've never been in this situation, so it would be impossible for me to be able to make that call. All we can do is try to pull you up so, hold tight."

Eric nodded at Ricky and Joey. "He's not gonna get any lighter. You guys ready?"

They nodded.

"Together now," Eric said. "Go."

They pulled. Joey cried out in pain, still, the rope moved up toward them a few inches.

"Can you make it, Joey?" Ricky asked.

"Yes. Just go," Joey grunted.

"Go," Eric said. They pulled again.

At first Joey didn't understand why the pain suddenly eased. He'd thought maybe his hand had been torn off, but then, in that fraction of a second he knew what happened. "No!" he screamed as the broken rope came flipping up over the edge.

"Dad!" JoJo cried again.

Bella sank down to her knees. "No, oh God, no."

The world seemed silent. No rain. No wind. Nothing. Joey, Eric and Ricky crawled to the edge of the cliff and looked down. All they could see was the churning water about two hundred feet below. If Mark's body had hit the water, it would already be downstream. They presumed that's what happened because they couldn't see anything on the ground or rocks.

Joey had his hands over his head, his face against the ground. Ricky and Eric sat dazed, pale and shaken. Bree had her arms around young Eric and JoJo, the three of them crying together. Logan wrapped his arms around his mom, knowing it was his fault. It was all his fault.

Eric's cell phone began to ring. He knew it was probably Shelley or Jeffy. Jeffy had probably foreseen what happened. Tears in his eyes, he had to blink several times to read the caller ID. He frowned, then excitedly put the phone to his ear. "Mark?"

Everyone looked toward Eric.

Eric scrambled to the side of the cliff so he could get a better view.

Then spoke into his phone. "No, I can't see you."

Everyone came to the edge of the cliff. Smiling, Eric turned toward them. "He's alive. He says he's about thirty feet down straddling a tree that was growing out of the side of the cliff." Eric put the phone on speaker. "Are you hurt?"

"I got the wind knocked out of me pretty good," Mark answered. "And I think I broke a finger cuz I was trying to grab at anything I could on the way down. I see blood but I'm not sure where it's coming from and I'm afraid to move too much to try to find out because, regardless of what the adrenaline junkies say, free falling is not that much fun."

Eric looked around at the faces filled with joy that just a few seconds ago had been filled with despair, and was really, really glad his wife hadn't been here. "I can tell you right now, Mark, there are some pretty thankful people up here," Eric said, his voice thick with emotion.

It was several seconds before Mark answered. "I bet," he said quietly. "And one down here as well. How's Joey's hand?"

"You don't worry about my hand," Joey said loudly. "But if it makes you feel any better, I think it's just sprained."

"Everyone else is okay?" Mark asked.

"He's an idiot," Joey said. "Asking how we're doing."

"Oh no, the tree is breaking," Mark shouted.

When no one moved, they heard Mark laughing. "Just kidding."

"Once we get you home safe and sound, I'm gonna kick your butt," Joey said.

"You're gonna have to get in line," Ricky added.

Everyone agreed and looked up with giant smiles on their faces as they heard the chopping sound of a helicopter as it approached.

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Isaiah 41:10

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed,
for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Chapter 19 - Epilogue

"The Kino Challenge has become a big deal indeed. What began thirteen years ago as a challenge issued by a disgruntled paparazzo who'd insisted Ricky Kino prove he was a real martial artist, is now big business involving big celebrities, and making big money for the *Heal the World Foundation* and also for the *Angel Network Foundation*.

"Since the very first time, the Challenge has taken place on the second Saturday of November in the Rosewood Sports Arena, just south of the USC campus. The event is always sold out.

"Because it is a charity event, ticket prices range from two hundred dollars to one thousand dollars ringside, but the biggest money is made through the pay-per-view venue. Neither the Kino family, the challengers nor the many celebrities whom you will see perform here today, ever receive payment. All proceeds go to both the *Heal the World Foundation, The Angel Network,* and three other charities selected by challengers and celebs.

"As you all know, former actor turned Ameritech agent Joey Adams, stepbrother to Ricky Kino and also brother to the beautiful and talented Breanna Adams I might add, has been the most recent representative of the Kino family for the past several years. Also, as you know, Joey was shot on the courthouse steps last month by a man he'd helped put behind bars. Everyone here at ESPN is happy to hear of Joey's recovery.

"Representing the family this year is Joey's older brother, Mark Adams. Mark is a 5th degree black belt, a former All-American quarterback and is actually a criminal defense attorney practicing right here in the Los Angeles area. Mr. Adams answered questions at a press conference last week and we'll play that clip for you now."

The screen flashed from the picture of Mark, to video of Mark sitting behind a desk, flanked on either side by Ricky and Joey.

"I understand you weren't particularly happy about having to fight

in this year's challenge," one reporter said.

Mark shrugged. "The reason for me having to represent the family was hardly a reason to be excited. Still, I'm honored to represent them and will do my best to honor their faith in me."

"Those are hardly the words of a great competitor," another reporter remarked. "I mean, 'I'll do my best' doesn't sound very confident."

Mark smiled. "Everyone has their own style. Me, I don't talk trash. I just go out there and put down when the time comes."

"Are you saying your brothers do talk trash?"

Mark grinned, turned his head to smile at both Joey and Ricky. "Yeah they do. Still, I guess it's only trash if you don't deliver and they most certainly deliver. They simply have a more flamboyant style than me. Different personalities, but same teacher."

"Do you think the injuries you sustained when you fell off that cliff last week will affect the outcome in next week's challenge?" a female reporter asked.

"I hope not," he said, holding up a splinted finger.

"Can you tell us about the incident?" she asked.

"Would rather not go into it, but, in a nutshell, I fell and my fall was broken by a tree growing out of the side of the canyon wall. I broke my finger and cut my arm pretty good."

"Mr. Adams, let me get to the point," another reporter said loudly. "What the world really wants to know is about your affair with Bella Landow and if the two of you plotted to kill her husband."

They'd been expecting it. Ricky started to object to the question but Mark stopped him. "Let me just say this," Mark said calmly. "I don't really care what the world wants to know. I don't play that and I don't owe the world any explanations."

"Then you don't deny it," the reporter continued.

"I absolutely deny it, but the world is gonna think what they want to think regardless of what I say. Look, the police know the entire story. They did their job properly and they looked into all the possibilities before they made their call. It was self-defense. Bella Landow has been terrorized for years by her husband. If she hadn't fired that gun, she'd be dead right now. And I for one, am really glad that she had the guts to defend herself. And if any of you had seen the way Landow hurt her, you'd be as glad as me that he's dead."

Neither Ricky nor Joey flinched at the statement, showing their absolute support for Mark's opinion.

"Mr. Adams, it's hardly politically correct to be happy about the death of another human being."

"Do you think I or any member of my family care about being politically correct? Political correctness is just a silly game. If you had seen Ms. Landow's bashed in face, or the fear in the face of her son, you might be able to understand a small part of the terror, pain and heartache that human being caused. I believe in getting rid of the bullies on the playground. Gordon Landow was a bully. I'm glad he's gone. I'll never change my mind or back down."

"You say you don't care about being politically correct. Then you would use a racial slur?"

Mark laughed, shook his head at the ridiculousness of the question. "I also believe in honor and integrity and class and I have a great love for mankind– all of mankind, even those who are different than me so no, I would personally never use a racial slur."

"Ricky, I understand you've been key in training Mark," another reporter asked.

Ricky smiled, nodded at the man in appreciation for the change of subject. "Actually, I've been training Mark since he was eight."

"Some say Mark doesn't have the same competitive edge as you and Joey. Some call him a 'gentle giant.' What are your thoughts on that?"

"I think his teammates on the football field would disagree with that assessment," Ricky said.

Joey sat up straight. "It doesn't matter what our thoughts are on that. We'll know soon enough if it's true, won't we?"

"Ricky, what do you think about..."

Eric turned off the TV in the dressing room. "That's enough of that. I gotta go out and see to Jeffy."

"We'll be out shortly," Ricky said.

"You know, Mark," Eric said. "The crowd doesn't expect to see you until your bout. No one would criticize you for watching Jeffy's fights from back here."

"My sister is about to fight in her first Kino Challenge. I'm gonna be there for her, ringside, cheering her on like the rest of the family."

Eric nodded with a smile. "Just sayin'."

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Cameras panned as the Kino entourage made their way across the arena to their designated area. Casually smiling, they nodded at acquaintances, shook some hands, pointed at some friends and waved.

Sports announcers were having a blast with so many to talk about at once. Black belt Hall of Famer Grandmaster Eric Kino. His wife, MART champion Shelley Adams Kino. His son, Kino Challenge champion and movie star, Ricky Kino. Shelley's daughter, two-time Oscar winner, Breanna Adams. Actor turned security agent and current Kino Challenge champion, Joey Adams still recovering from a gunshot wound to the chest. LA attorney, former All-American quarterback, Mark Adams. Artist, composer, doctor, genius, and extraordinary athlete, June Flower Kino, known to all her friends as Jeffy. Then of course there were the children of Breanna Adams and Ricky Kino, Eric and Taylor Kino and Mark Adams' son from a previous relationship, Joseph Adams.

The family was flanked by men dressed in black who were Ameritech agents. Already seated in the VIP section were more of their friends, many of them celebrities, along with Breez, Bella and Logan. Jason, Angel and one of Jeffy's two best friends, Kimmie Lee, sat beside Justin and Lori Lee. A few rows up Jeff and Mickey Davis sat with their two young sons, Daniel and Jeremy with Mickey's younger sister, Marissa, Jeffy's other best friend.

Country music legend Toby Nash, sat with his children, sixteen-year-old Grace and twelve-year-old Brody. His wife, Caroline, a celebrity judge on the dancing reality show, was busy filling her role as celebrity cheerleader.

She'd brought a few of her pro dancers with her this time.

Other friends of the Kinos there to watch the tournament who came all the way from Georgia were John and Jodi Appel, with son Jacob. They brought with them their good friends, Chaz and Lisa Stewart and their children, Melaynah, lovingly called Laynah-bug, who, at eleven years old, was a breathtaking redhead like her mother, and Charles and Matt, ages five and three respectively.

And who could miss, sitting on the other side of Jeff Davis' family, the Tanners. Father and son, Keegan and Gabriel Tanner both had dark hair. And then there was a sea of blondes beginning with Lizzy Tanner, who'd recently been busy promoting her second country

album on Toby Nash's label and would be singing tonight. In a neat row in front of her sat five gorgeous, blond-haired, blue-eyed angels. Or so young Eric, Logan and JoJo thought. Heather, who was fifteen, twins Rose and Violet who were one year younger and twins Daisy and Lily another year younger still.

Everyone cheered as Mark and the family approached. Breez blew a kiss at Joey. Bella smiled sweetly at Mark. But the focus right now was on Jeffy who would be fighting first.

"Good grief, look at her," Breez said to Bella. "She's got a body like some superhero."

"I feel sorry for her opponents," Bella said. "Jeffy looks so mean."

"She's just focused," Angel said as she turned to look over the two sisters. "Have you never seen the Kinos compete?"

"I've watched bits and pieces of a few challenges," Breez said.

"Well, you are in for a real treat. It's like, they can turn it on and off like a light switch. They can be laughing and joking around one minute and then when it's time to fight, they become a very mean machine. It will be interesting to see if Jeffy's opponents even come close to giving her any competition."

"What do you think, Jason?" Breez asked. "Will her opponents stand a chance?"

Jason shook his head. "I doubt it. Jeffy's been sparring against only men since she was born. She's quick, she's powerful, she's smart and she's psychic. I'll be surprised if anyone even gets in a punch."

Jeffy looked up at them as if she knew they were talking about her. She smiled and waved.

"Hey, Jeffy," Marissa and Kimmie yelled together. "Kick some bootie, girl!"

Jeffy laughed, but her eyes searched for Cameron. She'd thought, she'd hoped, because he would know how important this was for her, that he would come to show his support, even if it was just to show support for a friend, but he wasn't here.

Her father spoke from behind her. "I heard he went to Europe to do some studying."

She turned and smiled sadly at her father. "Who's being psychic now, Daddy?"

"Sorry, baby girl, but it's pretty obvious. I'm pretty sure he'd be here if he could. Now, what happened to the focus, huh?"

She sighed, drew a cleansing breath. "It's right here."

It took another fifteen minutes to get through the preliminaries and then the challenge began.

Jeffy Kino blew away her competition just like Jason predicted. The crowd was taken with the small, quick, Kino beauty who showed such skill, such class, such honor and compassion in the ring. It was really the first time the world had gotten a good look at this phenom who was June Flower Kino, and they liked what they saw.

She was in complete control. She showed amazing sportsmanship when one of her two opponents became agitated. She showed humility and gratitude. Add that to the fact it was Jeffy's foundation that had done so much good in the world, brought medicine to both third-world countries and those in the U.S. who struggled, clothed and fed the poor, funded research to find real cures for disease. In one night, she'd become America's sweetheart.

When her part of the challenge was over, she joined the other celebrity cheerleaders as she always had since the first challenge when she'd been just seven years old. Along with sister Bree, Caroline Smith, the two pro dancers Caroline brought with her, there was Sasha, a gorgeous R&B Grammy winner, Chen Lu, the famous Korean ice skater, and Katie Ash, the new teenage heartthrob actress.

The next part of the challenge was two bouts fought by the winning Kino school student. This year it was Bohai Lin, a twenty-four-year-old, second-degree black belt. He too, was amazing. He too won both his bouts, the last one just barely by the skin of his teeth.

"You ready?" Joey asked as he put Mark in a headlock.

They'd returned to the dressing room after Jeffy competed and had been stretching and warming up. Mark's broken finger was taped securely as was the deep gash he had in his arm. Even though it'd been two weeks, it was still pretty sore and they were all hoping that it wouldn't be a huge distraction.

Normally, a broken finger would be reason enough to drop out of a competition. However, in the original challenge, Ricky had fought with three recently healed broken fingers and had re-broken one during the fights. So, for Mark, a broken finger could not be an excuse.

Mark jumped in place several times. "Yeah. Need to get out there and get going. Don't like this waiting around stuff."

"I hear ya," Ricky said.

Eric placed his hands on Mark's shoulders. "I believe in you, Mark. You reach down inside yourself and find that competitive edge. I know it's there. I've seen it manifest in plenty of football games, especially when you're coming from behind. But today, no coming from behind. Stay on top. Stay out front. There are quite a few who don't believe you have what it takes. Prove them wrong."

Mark nodded. "I've been misjudged most of my life by outsiders. It's nothing new to me and it doesn't bother me. It won't even factor into my win today."

Eric smiled. "That's what I wanted to hear. Let's go get 'em."

When Mark made his way to the ring, the crowd roared. When he threw his first punch in the first bout, they roared. When he sent the first man down and had to back off, they roared. The entire fight, all three bouts were like every pitch in the bottom of the ninth in the World Series in Yankee Stadium. Every single thing Mark did, the crowd roared.

If there was such a thing as a home-field advantage in martial arts, Mark had it. His opponents never stood a chance. They were all such good sports, he almost felt sorry for them. Almost. He knew that was where the 'gentle giant' thing came in. His ability to have compassion. He didn't give in to it though. Not until each bout was finished.

He easily did away with his first opponent. Had a decent, equal match with his second opponent. And then, the fatigue factor came into play. His third opponent was the biggest and the best of the three. Mark had to fight him like his life depended on it. He had to dig deep to find the energy and to fight the pain in his hand and arm. Eric, Joey and Ricky repeating their mantras to him kept him focused. "Dig deep, bro. You can do it." "Focus, Mark. Block, punch. Block, punch. Show us what you can do. Come on, Mark. Show us. Show us."

When the third bout ended, Mark had no idea if he'd won. He moved to his corner and sat while Eric attended to him. He had a cut on his cheekbone. His body poured sweat and he could barely see what was happening. When he was called to the center of the ring for the decision, he almost stumbled.

When the referee raised his hand and declared him the winner, the arena went crazy. Mark thought of the Rocky/Adrian scene and smiled, even though he knew Bella wouldn't come running into the ring, she'd show him very soon that she was proud of him.

Ricky, Joey, Eric, Jason, Justin and Jeff tossed him up on their shoulders and carried him from the ring. Jeffy jumped up to high-five him. JoJo, young Eric and Logan hugged him and jumped around like monkeys. Bella and Breez hugged the crowd that hugged him.

He realized he felt happy and satisfied. He felt proud of himself. He'd trained hard, dug down deep, through pain and anguish, and with God's help, he'd done something amazing. He'd shown the world and himself that he could do this hard thing.

The crowd dispersed and Mark headed into the dressing room to dress before he had to do some interviews. The shower was comforting to his sore body. It was quiet in the room where he dressed. He'd just finished tying his shoes when he looked up to see Joey standing there.

"Hey. Didn't hear you."

"Just came in to speak to you before you get swamped again and before you get home and are surrounded by all the people."

"Okay. Is something wrong?"

"Not a thing, thank God."

Mark smiled. It'd been a rough month.

"I've always been proud of you, Mark. Proud that you're my older brother. I've always looked up to you."

Mark nodded. "I feel the same about you, Joey."

"I know. Just thought I should tell you, especially after thinking I'd lost you, that– well– geez– I guess I can't get the words out."

Mark smiled at his little brother. "Now, there's a first. I've always thought of you as the little orator. Ever since you signed up for that first drama club meeting."

Joey gave a soft laugh. "That was a trip."

Mark moved forward, held out his hand and Joey took it.

"Let me see if I can put words to what you were trying to say. I love you, brother. Almost more than words can say. More than actions can portray. I'm proud of you and I'm grateful to have you in my life. What's mine is yours and I always got your back. How's that?"

Joey nodded. "Well, that about says it. Except for one more thing. I told you to prove yourself to me only to motivate you for the challenge. You never have to prove yourself to me. Because I know you, Mark. I know you like I know my own heart."

Mark jerked Joey forward and they hugged.

"Can we get in on that?" Breez asked, Bella standing beside her.

They broke apart and, smiling, reached out to the women, drew them into their arms and kissed them.

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Shelley watched the action from the balcony landing near her front door. It was indeed a crowd. They had a great many friends from all across the country and she felt happy and content that they were all here under her roof.

The past few months had been quite an adventure. She'd almost lost a grandson, a soon-to-be grandson and both her sons. It didn't make her bitter. It made her grateful and gave her renewed ability to live in the moment and enjoy each precious thing.

Her eyes sought out her husband who was working the crowd, stopping to chat, shaking hands. Her husband, who never seemed to tire, who was the same wonderful man he'd been when she first met him and fell in love more than twenty years ago.

There were so many children in the house tonight. She noticed they'd naturally divided into age groups. In one corner, young Eric, JoJo and Logan entertained and played host to thirteen-year-olds Daisy and Lily Anderson, eleven-year-old Laynah Stewart, twelve-year-old Jacob Appel, and twelve-year-old Brody Smith. Shelley smiled, five boys to three girls. She wondered how that was working out.

Eight-year-old Taylor Kino and nine-year-old Gabriel Tanner were seemingly having a very grown up conversation about some app on Taylor's iPad.

Five-year-old Charlie Stewart was playing with his three-year-old brother, Matt, and with the four- and-three-year-old Davis boys, Dan and Jeremy. The foursome were being amazingly well-behaved, at least for the moment.

Sixteen-year-old Grace Smith and fifteen-year-old Heather Anderson stood together talking, their faces quite animated about whatever subject matter they pursued. Fourteen-year-olds Rose and Violet Anderson stood near Jeffy, their eyes large in complete adoration. Next to Jeffy, her best friends, Kimmie Lee and Marissa Daley chatted with her and were kindly including the young Anderson girls in the conversation.

Jeffy glanced up at her mom as if she'd known she was thinking of her. She smiled, winked. Shelley blew her a kiss.

Jeffy looked around the room, taking in the same scene as her mother, but from a different perspective. Here were so many people

whom she loved dearly. She glanced at Mark. She'd been right about him. He *had* been in danger. Now though, he stood with his arm around the woman he loved who was smiling and looking more radiant than Jeffy had ever seen.

Jeffy saw her father, chatting, shaking hands as he made his way around the room, doing his best to make sure everyone in his home was comfortable and feeling welcome and seeing if there was some way he could serve them. Ricky and Bree were uncharacteristically snuggled up in a corner with each other rather than socializing.

She saw Toby Nash and his wife Caroline talking to Angel Lee and Lizzy Tanner. Keegan Tanner was gesturing largely as he spoke to Jason and Justin Lee. A feeling came over her and she glanced to her left to see Joey pulling Breez close to him. He leaned down and kissed her, pulled away, nodded at her and smiled. He turned toward the guests.

"Attention everyone," Joey said loudly. "I have an announcement to make." The room quieted.

"It's with great pleasure that I would like to take this opportunity to tell all of our family and friends that I asked Breez Sheridan to marry me and she consented."

The room erupted in applause and congratulations.

Someone proposed a toast and Mark and Ricky quickly went around filling everyone's glass with champagne. Eric grabbed a glass for himself and another for Shelley and headed up to the balcony. He came up behind her, kissed her cheek. She turned to him, took the offered glass.

"Are you happy, Shelley girl?"

She wiped a tear from her eye. "So very happy, Eric."

"Look at what God is creating," Eric began. "Look at this home full of His warriors. Look around you. These are some of the strongest, most faithful, most loving people I've ever known. It fills my heart to see the wonders and the miracles God is putting together. I don't know exactly what God's plan is as we wait for the return of Jesus, but I know there IS a plan and I am so grateful that we, you and me, sweet Shelley, are a part of it. I just hope I can remain worthy."

"I have faith in you, Eric," Shelley whispered.

A series of toasts began, with Mark going first. So many toasts were offered that it was surprising everyone was still on their feet.

Feeling overwhelmed by the emotions around her, Jeffy excused

herself from the group. She took one last glance around. Joey was kissing Breez. Mark had Bella pulled up tight against him and was whispering in her ear. Bree and Ricky were kissing. The Tanners were kissing. Toby and Caroline were just nibbling on each other's lips. Chaz Stewart had one hand on his wife's waist and the other twisted in her mass of red hair. Justin and Lori Lee were hugging. Kimmie's parents just pulled away from a heated embrace. Jodi Appel was sitting on her husband's lap and had her head bent to him.

Jeffy looked up toward the balcony to see her mother and father had their arms around each other, their foreheads pressed together as they whispered to each other. Jeffy's eyes filled with tears. She was happy for everyone. She was. She was happy for all the love she felt around her, and yet, she felt lonely. So very lonely. She was a stranger in a strange land. She was different from everyone. She was a freak.

Would she ever find what everyone here had found? Would she even recognize it when it came her way? She thought she had it at the age of fifteen when she'd met her Cameron. Apparently, she was not a very good judge of what a good relationship was, because she'd had no idea why her boyfriend was so unhappy with her. Quietly, she made her way to her room to ponder the next move she would make in her life. She had a feeling it wouldn't be going back to the hospital. She had much greater things to accomplish.

Back downstairs, Mark turned to Bella. "Should we tell them about *our* engagement?"

She shook her head. "No, let's wait. Let's allow Breez to have the complete spotlight. I got to have it when my parents married me off the first time. It's her turn."

"Ah, Bella, I am so in love with you."

She gazed into his warm eyes. "Are you happy, Mark?"

"Happier than I ever thought I could be. I've come to that grateful conclusion recently."

"And just how did you come to that conclusion?" she asked.

He laughed. "I guess I free-fell to it. In a split second, I thought I was dead, I was saved and I learned true gratitude."

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Jeremiah 1:5

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

✞✞✞

Dear Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name,
May all who read this book have instant clarity to know Your will for them and may they be blessed with the strength and courage to pursue that course.

I pray whatever their circumstances, You will lift them up and give them peace. Wrap Your loving arms around them, heal them, please Father, be it physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. In Jesus' almighty name I pray, Amen.

✞✞✞

A Note from McCartney Green...

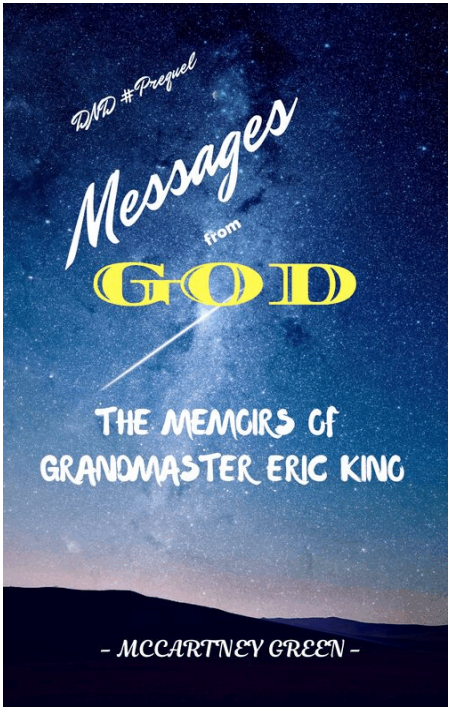
I will go where God leads me. I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life, and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

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 Available for 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

The consequences of what came before are still unfolding as Young Eric struggles to recover, families adjust to new realities, and the next generation begins stepping into roles once carried by their parents. Love deepens, new relationships take root, and healing proves to be as much about patience and trust as strength.

As Gabe and Taylor's influence grows and the expanding family is drawn toward Pine Forest, Georgia, long-awaited purposes begin to surface. Children become leaders, parents learn when to step back, and a new generation begins discovering that the work God has placed before them may be larger than any of them imagined.

#12—Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name

The family gathers in Pine Forest with an enormous goal: feed thousands of God's children, meet practical needs, restore dignity, and serve every person who crosses their path. But what begins as a Thanksgiving mission soon becomes something far greater than food.

As attacks mount and darkness works to stop the ministry, the Kinos, Tanners, Appels, Stewarts, and the next generation refuse to retreat. Families are strengthened, long-held wounds begin to heal, new bonds are made permanent, and ordinary acts of service become miracles in the lives of people who simply needed someone to see them. Feed My Sheep asks what might happen if serving God meant noticing one person at a time—and refusing to walk past.

#13—For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name

For the first time, celebrate Christmas with the Kinos, Tanners, and the enormous family God has gathered around them. But this season becomes far more than decorations, gifts, and traditions as old wounds surface, former enemies return, strangers arrive carrying hidden needs, and forgotten places are given new life.

Through forgiveness, rescue, reconciliation, service, and unexpected second chances, the family discovers that honoring the birth of Jesus means more than remembering what happened long ago. It means becoming His hands and heart now—welcoming the unwanted, restoring what has been broken, and making room for those who thought they had no place to belong.

#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 darkness that has followed generations. His arrival may also bring an unexpected answer for Lily Tanner, who has begun to wonder whether everyone she loves has found their person except her. But a far greater story is unfolding. Grandmaster Eric Kino discovers that he is not the only man whose life was changed by an angelic encounter at the age of ten. One by one, others emerge—men from across the world who disappeared for three days, returned with a calling, and were sent to teach.
As the Twelve are drawn together and darkness closes in, families, warriors, believers, and former strangers converge on Pine Forest. Old mysteries begin to make sense, lives are transformed, new love takes root, and a lifetime of seemingly separate callings begins to reveal a larger design—one meant 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!"

I love to read books that make me think and have positive motivational ideas in them and I have to say, this book has it all. Well written and hard to put down, *Messages* certainly gave me something to think about. McCartney Green has a style of writing that makes people feel like we can make the world a better place. She is a true light and always makes me smile. I look forward to reading her future books.

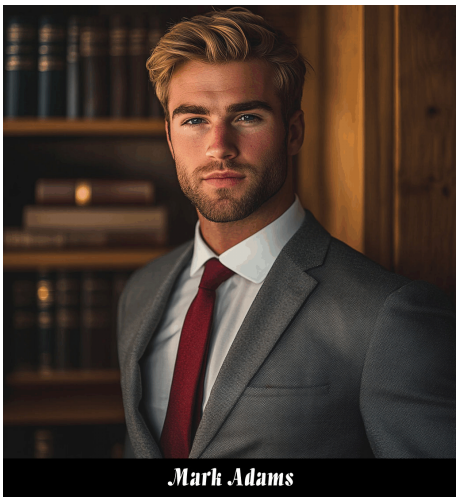
~Melanie Glenise Schmitt~
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Once again, Author McCartney Green has delivered a well written title that deserves much attention and appreciation. The work is chock full of wisdom spoken through the mind and heart of the much beloved character in her *DND In Jesus' Name series*, Grandmaster Eric Kino, who is based on a personal epiphany. I absolutely adored this character, so it was a real treat for the author to give her readers more from the patriarch of this amazing family. Though I may not be in complete personal agreement with some of the spiritual aspects, I can certainly glean the truths and wisdom in this book for leading and living a more joyful and contented life. I found myself nodding in agreement more than not. Regardless of where you are in your spiritual life, there is something for everyone here. The only thing I would suggest as a reader of her series is to read that series before reading this book. There are a lot of spoilers here for the series if you haven't read it yet. Also, it will give you a better understanding of the heart and mind of the man that is Grandmaster Eric Kino. And as you read this title, you will easily be able to envision him telling you his story as you sit out on the patio of his beautiful home with wife Shelley by his side, taking in the ocean breezes while you enjoy a cup of cleansing tea.

~Marla Thompson~
Indiana

Scroll down for Pics!
Or head to mccartneygreen.org to the Photo Album to see even more!

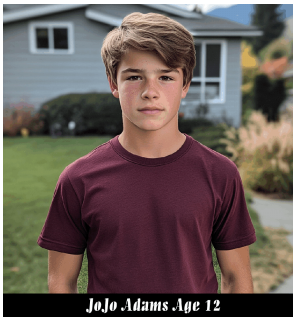


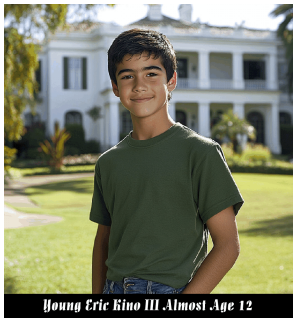

Mark Adams

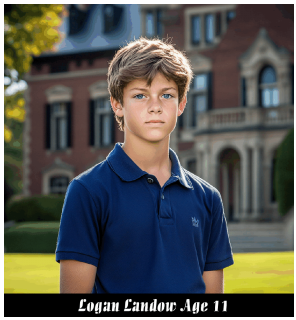

Bella Landow

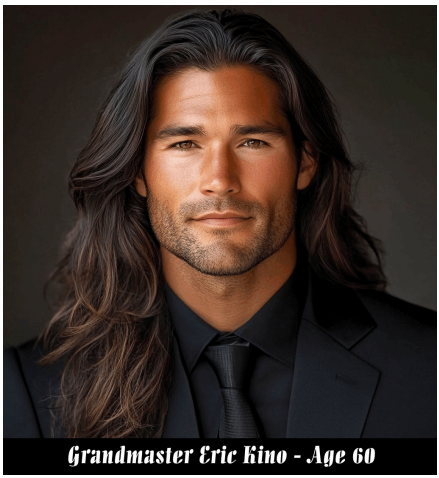

Joey Adams


Breez Sheridan


JoJo Adams Age 12


Young Eric Kino III Almost Age 12


Logan Landow Age 11


Grandmaster Eric Kino - Age 60




Gordon Landow

Continue with DND #8 June Flower—In Jesus' Name
Sneak preview...

"And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy til I come."
Luke 19:13

Chapter One

Fifteen months earlier (than the Prologue)
Black Friday Galleria Mall, Newport Beach, CA

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

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

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

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

Jeffy was grateful for Kimmie's friendship even though she hadn't always shown it. It had been difficult to relate when Kimmie was a freshman in high school and Jeffy was halfway through achieving her

doctorate. It spoke well for Kimmie that she didn't let Jeffy's brain intimidate her. She seemed to understand Jeffy's need for normal friends. Well, either Kimmie understood or had been urged by her mother and father who probably explained that Jeffy needed to develop emotionally and socially as well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gee, thanks," Jeffy answered dryly.

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

"Whatever makes you happy, Kimmie."

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

"What?"

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

"Sorry. Guess I really am tired."

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

"Play *Linkin Park*," Kimmie said, then added, "volume up," with a grin toward her friend. Jeffy leaned her head back and closed her eyes, seeking comfort in the warm rays of the sun as she listened to Kimmie sing along with the music. She felt restless. Uncomfortable. She felt strongly that they needed to get home and she hoped everyone there was okay.

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

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

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

✞✞✞

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Pi Anyone? :)

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."